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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

NUMBER 4

The Dagger Affair

Solo and Illya desperately search for the diabolical machine that could end human life on Earth, in a new U.N.C.L.E. adventure by David McDaniel

The Dagger Affair

by David McDaniel

"Tell us all about Dagger!"

That was the command thrown at Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin by the unseen THRUSH agents who kidnapped them and interrogated them with lie detectors. And from each U.N.C.L.E. agent came the same answer: "We know absolutely nothing of DAGGER."

"You appear to be telling the truth," said the hidden voice. "A pity...."

But it was more than merely unfortunate that the U.N.C.L.E. organization had never heard of DAGGER. For the secret behind that name was an insane plot for mass murder — the murder of the human race!

Author's Dedication:

To Dean and Shirley Dickensheet,
Technological Advisors on the Hierarchy

THE DAGGER AFFAIR

Illya Kuryakin blinked at the darkness in his bedroom and wondered what had awakened him. He listened intently while he counted to one hundred, and heard only the distant sound of traffic four floors below. But he knew there was someone else in his apartment. He turned his head slowly, looking about the room. It was empty. The luminous dial of his alarm clock told him it was shortly after 3:00 A.M.

Heaving a deep sigh and snorting as a sleeping man might, he rolled over in bed, and on the same squeak of the springs slipped to the floor. His hand moved under the edge of the mattress to grip the specially designed silenced automatic that was never out of his reach, and he rose warily to his feet.

Like a cat, he moved to the door. There was no light in the next room, but as he listened again he heard the sound of an incautiously drawn breath. His head moved, just enough to allow him a glimpse around the door. The faint light that seeped through the drawn curtains silhouetted a figure bending over the desk. The figure seemed human, except for the head.

Above the shoulders of a man there rose a great crested form with three huge eyes and insect-like antennae. Illya moved silently forward, his bare feet compressing the rug with no more sound than a passing ghost. A moment later he stood directly behind the intruder, and was able to see that the man — if it was a man — was in the midst of a thoroughly professional search. More remarkably, the search was being carried out in almost total darkness. Yet every move the man made was direct, smooth and efficient, as if he were working under full, even illumination. Either he was a trained owl, or was in fact a blind burglar....

Illya decided to find out. He leaned forward until his lips were inches from the man's ear, and spoke softly:

"May I help you find something?"

The effect was as if the searcher had touched an electric wire. Every muscle in his body seemed to spasm, and he snapped upright, spinning to face his host. Illya retired two steps and turned on the desk lamp. He held the little gun low enough that the man could see it clearly, and then tilted the lampshade to direct the light upon his visitor's face.

His entire head was blank and metallic, except for a human mouth and chin. The three eyes were black, glassy, and larger than coffee cups. After the first horrible impression faded, Illya realized that the man was wearing a large mask-like helmet. But at the same moment the man recovered his composure and spoke — to someone else.

"One — three. Plan Baker."

It was crisp, direct and emotionless. The man had not raised his hands, nor shown any indication of drawing a weapon. Illya glanced for a fraction of a second at the door to his right, and the window to his left. The window was open. He stepped back again, to keep a greater distance between himself and his prisoner, and reached for the telephone.

At that moment something flicked through the window and burst softly on the rug. The helmeted man still did not move, but to Illya he seemed gradually to draw away, as his gun became very heavy and began to pull his arm down. He fought to hold it up, but after a long time he grew tired, and began to fall very slowly. He did not remember hitting the floor.

* * *

Napoleon Solo was driving west on the Long Island Expressway after a most pleasant evening spent far up the island. By the rally clock on his dash, the time was 0320. The road was almost deserted, and he took advantage of this condition to push his red sportscar quite some distance over the speed limit. The night wind of his speed tore at his hair, and the cold of it stung his eyes so that the overhead lights were dancing spheres that sped by on either side. He sat lower in his seat and blinked his vision back to normal.

To his right, a racing-silver XKE Jaguar pulled out of an access ramp and roared a blue cloud as it accelerated. Napoleon glanced sideways as he

shot past, and saw a girl driving. But at the moment his mind was on his car, and speed.

His tachometer hovered around 4000 and the speedometer needle sat rock-steady a shade above ninety. He had at least another twenty, possibly thirty miles per hour in reserve, and he almost wished for a temptation to call on it. How long had it been since he had been able to open up all the way? Too long....

Then temptation came up from behind him, in the shape of a slender girl in a sleek silver Jag. The roar of her motor floated over the whipping of the wind, and a moment later she was even with him. As she passed, there was a moment in which he looked at her again, more closely. She was dressed in white, with a white scarf concealing her hair. She did not turn her head, but drove with a cool concentration as she accelerated away from him. Napoleon Solo smiled.

"If you want to race, I'm always glad to oblige a lady," he said into the wind. As he spoke his foot rode heavier on the gas pedal, and the little car shot forward. In a half-mile he was pacing her again.

Then she slowed very slightly, but enough that he would have had to brake to stay even with her. He didn't. He allowed himself to drift ahead until almost a full length separated them. A bridge whipped by overhead, and the echoes of their engines thundered around them for a moment. A car appeared on the other side of the divider, grew, flared by, and was gone, and Napoleon Solo remained a length ahead.

Suddenly she was beside him again, to the left, and he looked and smiled at her. Still she did not turn her head for a glimpse of him, and still he could not see her face.

She slipped ahead of him with an unexpected burst of power. He urged his speedometer over the magic hundred mark, and the wind tore the laugh of sheer exhilaration from his mouth and left it hanging in the air a hundred yards behind. At one hundred and five she was no longer pulling away, but he wasn't gaining.

That Jag was in superb condition! She was still accelerating as they crossed a hundred and ten together. At one-fifteen, he began to gain slightly. The little gas pedal was pressed firmly against the floor, and the tach was

edging into the cross-hatched zone above 6000 rpm. He touched one hundred and twenty, and the car ahead seemed to falter.

Five feet apart, the two cars split the darkness as blurs of red and silver, howling through the night like comets. Curves appeared before them and were taken without slack. Ramps rose beside them and arched away and vanished. Then a wide straight stretch showed before them — an easy five miles of level wide-open run.

The speedometer nudged one-twenty-two, and Napoleon drew even with the silver Jaguar. Then the girl turned her head to look at him. She was beautiful, after all. Napoleon grinned widely, and waved to her. His hand moved above the level of his windshield then, and he was nearly pulled out of his seat by the force of the slipstream.

The girl smiled sweetly, raised a hand, and blew him a kiss. And a moment later she was gone, as Napoleon suddenly started losing speed. The tach dropped to 500 and the speedometer was drifting downward past ninety, past seventy, past fifty...

The motor was gasping, and seemed to be missing on all cylinders. Napoleon guided his limping steed into an emergency off-ramp rather than risk permanent damage to the engine. He pulled up, set the hand brake, and watched the distant red star of a tail-light vanish around a far curve. He knew he would meet the driver of that Jaguar again — and there would be a re-match worth waiting for. He unfastened his seat belt, climbed stiffly out of the car, and raised the hood.

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Section I: "Is This A DAGGER That I See Before Me?"

Chapter 1: "Let's Call It A Little Vacation."

The Intelligence Section of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters in New York City maintains complete files of all information that could conceivably be of use in any investigation. And since Napoleon Solo was involved in an investigation, he carried a small scrap of paper with a license number into the automobile registry file room. His investigation was not connected with an assignment, but this was his secret. The license was that of a certain well-driven Jaguar he had encountered in the small hours of that morning.

With an especially serious set to his face, he stalked past the secretary at the desk, returning her greeting crisply, and drew out the proper file drawer. Leafing through the cards, he felt a twinge of guilt about his presence there — Alexander Waverly, his superior, had objected more than once to Solo's occasional use of U.N.C.L.E. facilities or records for his personal projects, which Waverly referred to as "peccadillos." Actually, Napoleon had seldom done more than make an outside telephone call or two. He'd checked out a company car a few times, and once a helicopter, and sometimes he would use U.N.C.L.E. files to find a telephone number or address, but that was all.

Even so, Waverly reacted as though he spent half his salaried time working for U.N.C.L.E. and the other half working on his own. Which was hardly the case — a man could not have achieved the rank of Chief Enforcement Agent at the age of 33 without devoting vast amounts of time, talent and concentration to his real job. What few people besides Waverly realized was that Napoleon Solo worked as hard at relaxation as he did at his job.

So it was that he was spending part of his lunch hour in automobile registry, in the hope of finding the girl he had raced the Long Island Expressway with the night before.

"2Q-727...729...730!" Address of registry: Washington Car Rentals, at Kennedy International Airport! His eyes recorded the legend just as the loudspeaker in the wall requested, *"Napoleon Solo — Napoleon Solo. Please report to Mr. Waverly's office at once!"*

Napoleon's hand froze on the card. He was discovered. The secretary had reported him to Mr. Waverly. She was jealous because he hadn't asked her for a date in almost a month. He glanced sideways, thoughtfully — she was looking at him. Oh, of course — the page for him. He pushed the card neatly back in place and headed for the door. He paused there, and said, "Miss Brown...I wonder..."

"I'm sorry, Napoleon," she said, "but I've got a date for this weekend."

"I was about to say, I wonder if you could call the commissary and have them send a roast beef sandwich and coffee up to Mr. Waverly's office for me."

She looked down quickly to hide her blush, and said, "Certainly, *Mister* Solo," as the door closed behind him.

* * *

Mr. Waverly's secretary nodded recognition as Napoleon sauntered past the desk to the sliding steel door which sensed his presence and opened automatically as he approached. On the way up from Section Four, he had decided to face his reprimand bravely, and follow up the registration on the car tomorrow. So as he stepped into the nerve center of U.N.C.L.E.'s Western Hemisphere Operations, he attempted a serious and efficient appearance. But neither of the occupants of the room noticed.

Illya Kuryakin, his deceptively innocent face intent and worried, was talking quietly to Waverly across a large round table which dominated the room. As Solo entered, he was saying, "...burst on the floor. Ten seconds later I was unconscious. I woke up about six-thirty, checked over the desk and the rest of the room. As far as I could tell, nothing was missing."

Waverly glanced up, saw Napoleon, and waved him to a seat at the table. Illya continued. "The helmet looked like a slightly modified version of the Thrush dark-vision set — an Infrared flood on the forehead and two screens over the eyes. With a backup man outside the window for support.

I'd like to know how he got around the alarms on the window, though. Good morning, Napoleon. Did you have a visitor last night?"

"Ah, no — not that I know of. But I didn't get in until about four. I had some engine trouble coming home. What time was your little party?"

"Just after three. They could have hit your apartment before, or even after, they hit mine."

"And by your description of their efficiency, I wouldn't be able to tell they'd been there. Well, they certainly could have been — that's exactly the way it looked when I came in."

Waverly cleared his throat. "There appears to be no reason to believe this was more than a routine surveillance by Thrush. But it is annoying to think they have ways of circumventing our best alarms. I'll post a guard on your apartment, Mr. Kuryakin, and put some technicians to work checking all the alarm systems. It could be inconvenient if our best agents were murdered in their beds some night." He fumbled a pipe out of his pocket and reached for a humidor. "What happened to your car last night, Mr. Solo? You mentioned engine trouble."

"Well, nothing, really. I was driving west on the Long Island Expressway..."

"Over the speed limit, I presume," said Waverly, tamping his pipe.

"Ah...yes...a little.... And for no particular reason that I could figure out, the motor kicked off."

"Just stopped?"

"Just stopped. I pulled over — in the area of the Clearview Expressway — and looked it over. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with the motor, so I tightened a few wires and tried to start it again. It caught right away, and gave me no more trouble all the way home."

"And this morning?"

"Behaving perfectly." Napoleon shrugged. "A little bit of temperament, I guess."

Waverly spent several seconds of complete concentration setting fire to the contents of his pipe and assuring himself it was drawing properly. He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together. "Possibly a

convenient coincidence. Leave your car with our technicians for a complete examination."

"We have an assignment, Napoleon," said Illya in response to his questioning look. He glanced at Waverly and smiled slightly. "At least, sort of an assignment."

Waverly exhaled a cloud of blue smoke and said, "Not exactly an assignment — not even a mission. If anything, it could be called a directed vacation. Some four weeks ago Thrush waylaid a courier in Vancouver, British Columbia. The same day some three million dollars in gold was smuggled out of Los Angeles to start a revolution in Terra Caliente — again, by Thrush." He puffed at his pipe, which bubbled softly in the silence of the room. "Since then — as far as we can tell — absolutely nothing has been done by Thrush in the Western third of the United States as of this morning."

Napoleon looked with raised eyebrows at Illya, who nodded.

"It seems ironic that the inaction of our enemies should cause more anxiety than their actions, but this is a strange war we are fighting. We feel it likely that Thrush has some major move in preparation, which will center in the west. You two are to go to Los Angeles, receive a final briefing by our office there, and then try to stir up trouble. If we can upset Thrush so that they move early, we may be able to start them off on the wrong foot. Los Angeles has been under maximum security for the last week — this is the reason. When Thrush knows you are coming in, they should try something. We will be ready for them."

"If this is a vacation," Napoleon muttered to Illya, "I think I'd rather stay at work."

Waverly pretended not to have heard, and continued with his characteristic absolute calm. "Naturally, you will be in constant communication with the local office, and under as steady surveillance as is practicable — probably by both sides."

He leaned to the table, placed two envelopes on it, and gave the bearing-mounted tabletop a turn. Napoleon and Illya each picked up an envelope as they came past.

"Here are your tickets on the 6:00 A.M. jet to Los Angeles. You will be met at the airport with the usual procedures. Take the afternoon to make your preparations; I can't say how long you'll be gone — probably less than two weeks. The more trouble you cause, the sooner you'll come home."

* * *

"The silver one was out last night — sure. Came in this morning at...lemme see...9:45."

"Do you remember who brought it in? A girl, brunette, white dress?"

"Yeah. Good lookin' girl. Kind of short, but a good figure."

"What else do you know about her? Is her driver's license number on your receipt? Her address, her name?"

The clerk looked up at Napoleon Solo and chuckled nastily. "Sorry, fella. We gotta protect our customers. Information like that only goes to the law." He paused, considering. "And it'd take about twenty bucks to convince me you should know anything else about that girl."

Napoleon didn't like being called "fella." He leaned down on the counter so that his face was level with the clerk's. "I don't have twenty dollars to spare right now," he said coolly. "Will this do?"

His wallet snapped open in front of the clerk's nose, and the light from the window flashed off the gold card identifying Napoleon Solo as an agent of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

The clerk swallowed his chewing gum, and rocked back from the counter. "Oh, sure, officer, sure! Anything for you! We just have to be careful, y'know — can't just give out information to anybody."

"We appreciate your zeal," Napoleon said, folding his wallet and replacing it. "But the girl's name and address?"

The clerk was fumbling in a file drawer. "Should be right here on top.... Yeah, here it is." He laid a yellow flimsy on the counter. "Garnet Keldur — from Los Angeles. Uh...that address there isn't the one on her license — she said she'd moved. But that's her, anyway."

Napoleon wrote down the name and address given. It was on Wilshire Boulevard, near the Country Club. An expensive area. "What about the car?

Anything left in it? Anything unusual she said or did?"

The clerk thought. "There's a nick in the upholstery in the back seat, just a little one. And there's dents in the back floor-mat, like something heavy had been stood there."

Napoleon, who had just asked the question for effect, heard the answers and forgot them at once. "Okay, thank you. If we need anything else, we'll call you. What's your name?"

The clerk gave it; Napoleon repeated it and forgot it too. But the clerk wasn't quite through.

"What'd she do, anyway? Kill somebody? I didn't see any blood in the car. Robbery?"

"Do?" said Napoleon with mild surprise. "She didn't do anything, as far as I know."

"She didn't? Then what are you after her for?"

Napoleon looked the little man straight in the eye and said coolly, "I just want to ask her for a date, that's all," and slid the glass door closed behind him.

* * *

At 5:30, Illya Kuryakin was sitting at the window seat on the jet-liner which would take off for Los Angeles at 6:00. Napoleon was late. He looked across the darkening field of Kennedy International Airport at another jet taking off, at a helicab lumbering along, then leaping awkwardly into the air, thrashing its arms to keep its balance. He looked up at the sound of a soft footstep, and his partner slipped into the seat beside him. "You're here early, Illya," said Napoleon.

The Russian smiled slightly. "I was about to comment on your lateness. It is 5:51 by my watch."

Napoleon smiled indulgently. "Your watch is fast." He held up his wrist. "5:46 on the nose."

"Then the master clock in the airport building is off by five minutes also. I set mine by it some seven minutes ago just as I boarded."

Napoleon stared at his own timepiece, which hummed ever so softly. Then he scowled. "So much for that. This battery-powered chronometer is supposed to be guaranteed accurate to two seconds a month. And it was set by WWV not a week ago."

"Must have a lose wire. I prefer the old-fashioned type. Springs and gears have less that can go wrong with them and are easier to fix when they do."

Napoleon said nothing. He was proud of his watch, and it had let him down. He set it ahead, looked at it a moment, shrugged, and set it back three hours. He'd adjust it to the second when they got to Los Angeles.

Shortly after they were airborne, the PA system gave the usual "Welcome aboard" announcement, and informed the passengers that they would be flying at thirty thousand feet while watching the latest James Bond film. Napoleon settled back happily and adjusted his headset as the cabin lights dimmed. Illya looked over at him and shook his head. "I'll never understand what you see in that escapist nonsense. I should think professional pride" He realized Napoleon was already lost in the opening credits, which featured a girl with an amazingly supple figure. Illya smiled. He understood already.

He slipped his earphones on, set the dial to the classical music channel, where a Prokofief symphony was beginning, and got out his briefcase. By the yellow glow of his seat lamp, he fished out a set of essays on *The Nesting Habits of the Greater Western Thrush.*

Chapter 2: "What Do You Know About DAGGER?"

It was warm when they stepped off the plane, and the black surface of the taxiway gave back the heat of the California day which had just ended. Ten minutes later they were in an ordinary-looking black car which bore them north along the San Diego Freeway a few miles in air-conditioned silence. Half an hour after landing, they rolled into a run-down garage on Washington Boulevard in Culver City, and heard the heavy steel door sigh closed behind them.

Their driver hopped out and opened their door. "Elevator straight ahead," he said. "Mr. Feldman is on level three, and he's expecting you."

Ralph Feldman stood up as they came into his office. "Napoleon — Illya," he said. "Good to see you. Sit."

They did. So did the head of the Los Angeles office, as he continued, "Things have been so quiet here in the last month we've been thinking about laying off some of the help. But now that you two are in town I expect the crime rate to go up again, right?" He laughed, then remembered his duties. "Look, did you two have dinner on the plane? Good. And I suppose Waverly briefed you on what's been happening — namely nothing? Okay. There isn't much I can tell you that isn't in the files. We've been watching known Thrush operatives continuously, and haven't even caught one running a red light. All we have to go on is what they were doing up to the 10th of last month. And that's in these two folders. Ah, the one with the blue tag is from Northern Section, headquarters San Francisco. Davis sent them down by teletype last night for you. If you can figure out anything from them, you're better than the local brains. You'll probably want to spend a while looking over them. Right now the night shift is on, and most of our field workers are off. We don't work day and night, like you New Yorkers do — especially since the dry spell hit. About the most excitement we've had has been a couple of twenty-dollar pots in the office poker game. But look here, I've been doing all the talking again. Since you're here to stir up Thrush's nest, as it were, you should have maximum security quartering. We have a comfortable apartment fixed up down on level five, private bath, kitchen privileges, maid service; a car will be placed at your disposal at once. Do you have any arrangements that would conflict?"

Illya was the first to realize that this was a direct question and an answer was expected. "No, we don't."

"Fine. I'll have your bags taken straight down to level seven. You two are automatically cleared for access to the whole operation here — your New York badges are keyed for our detectors too. How about the car?"

This time Napoleon spoke first. "Yes, I'll need one tonight."

"And I'd like to change clothes," said Illya. "I too have somewhere to go tonight."

Feldman raised both eyebrows. "That's amazing. You're in town half an hour, and already you've got angles of investigation. Will you be wanting tails? The feathered foemen certainly know you're in town, and may be after your scalps. It'd be damned embarrassing to report your loss to Mr. Waverly."

"Thanks, but no," said Napoleon. "Tails are long awkward things to drag around, and I'd be worried about losing him. Besides, if we can't take care of ourselves by now, we shouldn't be here. After all, Mr. Waverly just let us fly all the way across the country without even a tag pinned to our lapels so the stewardess would know where we were going. And we made it with hardly any difficulty."

Feldman laughed. "Sorry if I offended you. A natural precaution. Okay, if Waverly trusts you out in the big world, so do I. Check in about nine o'clock tomorrow morning, and let me know what you've found."

In their apartment on level five, Napoleon emptied his suitcase into the closet, freshened himself and changed to a crisp shirt. Illya put on his most casual black slacks and turtleneck sweater, and slipped a black leather jacket over his shoulders as they started out. Napoleon looked him up and down appraisingly. "Looks like we'll be exploring two different levels of society tonight, old friend. Can I drop you somewhere, or will you check out a motorcycle?"

They rode up to the garage, where Napoleon signed for a specially-equipped red sports model similar to his own and Illya chose a well-worn Harley-Davidson. Moments later they roared out onto the streets and away on their separate missions.

* * *

It was almost 10:00 A.M. when Napoleon drew up in front of his goal — a glittering high-rise apartment on Wilshire Boulevard in West Los Angeles. The address he'd copied from the car-rental contract in New York included the apartment number. He sauntered inside, past the row of numbered but nameless mailboxes, and into the elevator. He didn't notice the girl at the small switchboard in an alcove, who stared at him in wild surmise and then touched a set of buttons.

Suite 12-A was at the corner of the building. Napoleon used the one-way glass in the door to center his tie and pat a stray hair into place. He set his fingertip gently on the button and the door swung open violently. The knob was gripped in the hand of a tall and striking brunette. Napoleon's first impression was that she was about to strike *him*. "Solo, you officious rat! What are you trying to pin on me this time?"

For a few seconds Napoleon's mind was occupied with rearranging itself. This was *not* the girl he had raced with this morning — this was..."Helena!" he exclaimed. This girl was one of the most attractive features of an otherwise unattractive organization — Thrush! Well, he wanted to find out about them anyway. *Always land on your feet, my boy,* he thought to himself, and added aloud, "Well! Journeys end in lovers' meetings!"

"I deny everything," she said flatly. "Categorically and individually. I not only have done nothing you could possibly prove, I haven't done anything you *can't* prove. Now what do you have to say before I throw you out on your ear?"

"Why, Helena — sultry, beautiful Helena, my favorite little Thrush! How could you think..."

"Because it's true, you rat, and you know it. Now pick up your jaw and bug off before I call the house manager and have you thrown out the window."

"Helena, I'm ashamed of you. I *know* you haven't done anything, and I just came by on a social call. It seemed that every time I saw you, we ended

up shooting at each other. Now, I *hate* to mix business with pleasure, so I thought that since for once we have no business, we might..."

"*You* have no business, you fink," she snapped. "And you'll have no pleasure either if you're still here when I finish dialing this phone."

Napoleon backed out the door again, shaking his head sadly. "Helena, your problem is that you have no romance in your..." He dodged the vase that shattered on the opposite wall. "None at all. How..." A candy dish followed the vase into oblivion. "How empty your life must be." He retreated to the elevator, which had waited for him, slipped between the closing doors, and pushed the ground floor button.

In a few seconds he was fast asleep.

* * *

Farther north, on Sunset Boulevard, a slender, sullen-faced young man with straight blond hair sulked into a dimly-lit coffee house called *The Fifth Estate*. His eyes flickered over the entrance hall as he paused in the door. His black outfit made him appear to be a creature of the night out of which he had come. He ordered brusquely at the service window and found a corner seat near a practicing amateur guitarist who was struggling bravely to master a C-minor chord.

The crowd ran mostly to long hair, with beards on the men to distinguish the sexes; the clientele ranged around college age and a little over. Some were dressed less formally, with levis and open shirts; some more formally, with an occasional tie. Illya's motorcycle-black garb was about midway in the social spectrum, and blended well with the lighting — or absence thereof — which was his primary reason for wearing it.

Thrush did a small amount of recruiting in this milieu, but *The Fifth Estate* was a regular meeting place and information exchange center, not only for Thrush but for other, more politically oriented groups. Illya had hopes of spending several evenings there, getting into conversations and possibly picking up some useful information.

His spiced cider arrived, borne by a tall, leggy girl with straight black hair, and too much eye makeup. Illya flipped her a fifty-cent piece and settled back in his wicker chair. There was a fire in the fireplace —

welcome in the chill autumn night — and Illya stared into the flames while sipping his cider, with most of his attention given to the mumble of voices at the other tables. Occasionally he would catch a word, but never anything of import.

Some time later, he became aware that staring into the fire was making him a little sleepy. He remembered his interrupted rest that morning, and remembered also that it was three hours earlier here than in New York. He stood up, intending to get a breath of cool air outside. He stretched his arms, breathed once deeply, and fell over. The boy with the guitar and the waitress caught him before he hit the floor. Only one customer noticed, and he shrugged. They should keep drunks out of this place.

* * *

Napoleon Solo felt something hard against his back, and a stiffness in his neck. There was something cold and metallic under his arms, and beneath him as well. He cracked his eyelids, and saw his lap. He straightened up slowly and forced his eyes to focus on his surroundings. He was in the center of a perfectly cubical small metal room. Experimenting with his arms and legs, he found he was fastened into a metal chair which was solidly bolted to the floor. A rubber tube of some kind was about his chest, and a rubber cuff gripped his left forearm snugly. Wires ran from them to connections on the chair.

Directly in front of him was a small TV screen; above it was a small industrial television camera with a wide-angle lens, trained upon him. Everything was silent. The screen was blank. The room was evenly lit from some invisible, shadowless source.

He had just absorbed these facts when the TV screen in front of him flickered, formed a picture, rolled over, and steadied. He seemed to be looking down on a figure in a position identical to his own, fastened into a chair and hung about with wires. Seen from this position, the apparatuses were readily recognizable as the sources for a basic Keeler polygraph — a lie detector. But the figure was not his own. It was blond, and dressed all in black.... Napoleon sighed deeply. A very neat double-play for Thrush.

"Welcome, Mr. Solo." A voice spoke gently from somewhere just behind him. He twisted his head, but couldn't quite..."No, I'm not behind you. I'm some distance away. But the fidelity of the sound is quite remarkable, is it not?"

"Just wonderful," said Napoleon, with a little less than enthusiasm. "Where'd you buy the setup?"

"It was built to our own designs by native craftsmen under exclusive long-term contracts. Ah. Excuse me a moment."

Napoleon looked carefully at Illya's image on the screen. It had not moved. He was still unconscious. The voice spoke again. "Mr. Kuryakin," it said gently, "your skin conductivity and pulse changes indicated your return to consciousness some sixty seconds ago. I'm afraid your neck will be quite stiff if you continue to feign this condition."

On the screen, Illya straightened up slowly. He shook his head carefully, and winced. His voice came from behind Napoleon, somewhat more faintly. "What was in that cider, anyway?"

"A harmless potion of our own compounding. There should be no aftereffects, save a slight headache."

"Ah — I think the gas you used on me is a better formulation," said Napoleon, with the attitude of an interested professional. "It took effect almost instantly, and left no aftereffects at all."

"Yes," said the disembodied voice, "the gas is generally preferable, but is often impractical, such as in the case of one subject in a crowd, as with Mr. Kuryakin. Under these circumstances, either slipping the drug into their cider, or in some situations injecting it with a hypospray..."

"This is very interesting," said Illya, "but we have other calls to make tonight. Could we get to the business at hand?"

"Mr. Kuryakin," the voice said with mild reproof, "as you are our guest at the moment, I should hope your manners would be at their best."

Illya twitched slightly in his chair and caught his breath. The voice continued. "Consider that a reminder. Now, Mr. Solo, we want to know only one thing. Cooperate with us and depart as friends. What do you know about DAGGER?"

Napoleon cocked his head at the camera. "Absolutely nothing," he said.

Illya looked straight out of the screen and said, "Neither do I."

"The organization known as DAGGER — D, A, G, G, E, R — is unknown to you?"

"Completely."

There was some thirty seconds of silence. Then the voice spoke again. "Your arrival in Los Angeles was opportune — why did you come here?"

Napoleon looked down with an air of embarrassment. "Well, I was looking for a girl I met in New York."

"And I came along in case she had a friend," Illya said coolly.

A mild electric shock ran through the arms of the chair, and Napoleon winced away from it unsuccessfully. The voice spoke again. "This current can be increased to become quite painful. I asked you both to cooperate, and you are...What?" The last word was fainter, as if the speaker had turned away from the microphone. A moment later the electricity was cut off.

After a few seconds the voice came back on, sounding vaguely disturbed. "My apologies, Mr. Solo; you...ah...appear to be telling the truth, though I cannot say the same for your partner. Once more, what do you know about DAGGER?" it snapped suddenly.

"Nothing," both the U.N.C.L.E. agents snapped back at once.

The voice said nothing. Illya spoke again. "Were you looking for information on this 'DAGGER' when you broke into my apartment in Brooklyn Heights last night?"

There was no answer for some time, almost a minute and Napoleon counted the seconds. He was no longer expecting any response when the voice came back on, perfectly level. "No Thrush personnel have been in your apartment in Brooklyn Heights for the last six months."

Napoleon waited a moment, and, when Illya didn't seem about to make a comment, said, "Is there anything else? Since we really *don't* know anything about DAGGER, and as long as you have us trapped, can we tell you something anyway? It seems a shame to waste a perfectly good kidnapping."

"We doubt if you could tell us anything we don't already know," said the voice. It sighed. "The interview is at an end. Thank you, gentlemen."

There was a faint hissing sound from somewhere, and gradually Napoleon became aware that he was cold and damp. He was lying on something cold and damp, too. And someone was shaking him. Someone was also addressing him and not politely.

"All right, both of you. Come on — up and out. L.A. is a friendly city, but there's lots of hotels and there's laws against sleeping on the grass."

* * *

Napoleon sat up, clear-headed, and looked around. The cold gray light of dawn revealed a sylvan scene of grass, trees, a small lake, and a bulky gentleman in a black uniform with a badge and a night-stick.

"Ah, good morning, officer. I know this looks strange but..."

".. . but you can explain everything." He sighed. "Okay. Go ahead. Tell me one I've never heard before."

"I don't think I can do that, sergeant. But I *can* show you something you might have seen before." His fingers slipped gently around his wallet, and noticed his pistol was missing from its spring-loaded holster. The officer had moved back a step, and Napoleon noticed also a second patrolman some twenty feet away with his hand resting casually on his holstered revolver. Without a pause, Napoleon slid the wallet out and slipped it open to his gold U.N.C.L.E. identification. The sergeant leaned cautiously forward to examine it, then looked carefully at Napoleon.

Illya stirred on the grass, and the policeman moved back quickly. "U.N.C.L.E.?" he said. "Easy enough to check, and you won't mind waiting while we do." He turned his head slightly, and raised his voice. "Ben, call those characters in Culver City and see if they have two birds of these descriptions missing." He moved back a few paces, and waited.

Illya got slowly to his feet. "Good morning, Napoleon. I tend to agree with you — the gas is more efficient than the drug."

The policeman did not seem inclined to idle chatter, and they waited in silence until Ben trotted over from the car. "Yeah, Joe, they're okay," he

said. "Sorry for the inconvenience," he said to Napoleon and Illya, "but we don't often find a pair dressed like you two, carrying concealed weapons, sleeping on the grass in MacArthur Park. Can we give you a lift anywhere?"

"We'll see," said Napoleon. "My car may have been dropped nearby too. If not, we'll need a ride back to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. In the meantime, you can give us back our guns, if you don't mind."

The patrolman grinned, and dug the two sleek automatics out of their jacket pockets.

* * *

"Well, if she wasn't connected with Thrush, how do you explain her giving the address of a whole nest here in Los Angeles?"

"No, Napoleon, I don't believe it was coincidence. But I think I would tend to believe our master of ceremonies of last night. He would have no reason to lie about the operative in my apartment."

"What if the girl was from DAGGER, whatever that is? Obviously Thrush knows more about DAGGER than we do — they knew its name. Maybe the girl knows more about Thrush than about us."

"Reasonable. But we know *her* name, at least, and I will wager Thrush does not."

Napoleon shrugged. "For all the good that'll do us. How do you go about finding one girl in a city the size of Los Angeles?"

"Well," said Illya, "have you tried the telephone book?"

Napoleon looked thoughtful for a while, then without speaking he got up and wandered into the next room.

A few minutes later he came back with a slip of paper and a scowl. He folded the former and threw the latter at Illya. "Smart Russian...."

Illya rose to his feet. "It could be a coincidence, even if she was the only Garnet Keldur listed. Shall we drop out to the address you have written there and see?"

Chapter 3: "Today Just Isn't Our Day."

The unobtrusive blue sedan had been parked on a shady side street for over three hours. During that time no one had come out of or gone into the small white house on the next corner. Napoleon and Illya were side by side in the front seat, with the car radio playing softly. Napoleon was leaning back with his hat down over his eyes, since he'd won the last game. Illya was watching the house, and thinking hard. "Did you compose *The Firefly?*"

Without lifting his hat Napoleon pursed his lips for a few seconds, then said, "No, I am not Rudolf Friml."

"Were you a poor king and a worse flutist?"

"No, I am not Frederick the Great."

Three hours pass slowly when someone must be watching something constantly, and the two U.N.C.L.E. agents had been playing Botticelli for all three of those hours. Illya had won the first game, Napoleon the second.

Then Illya spoke again. "Did you collaborate with your brother on a translation from Horace called *Echoes of a Sabine Farm*?"

Silence descended again. After a while Napoleon lifted his hat and stared at Illya. "I'll pass."

"Eugene Field. You owe me a free question. Are you an American?"

Napoleon tilted his hat and leaned back again. "Yes."

"Are you interested in a trim brunette who just walked out of that house?"

Napoleon sat upright and grabbed the binoculars lying on the seat beside him. He focused on the face of the girl hurrying down the walk some seventy-five feet away and braced his elbows on the dashboard. "Looks like her. Remember, I only got a glimpse from a speeding car. But that's the same general outline."

Illya turned the key in the ignition and the motor caught quietly as the brunette slid into a car parked at her curb and took off as if something were after her. Five seconds later, something was.

She drove fast, but not recklessly. As he watched the car ahead of them maneuvering through the heavy afternoon traffic, Napoleon was sure this

must be the same girl.

They followed her north, then onto the Hollywood freeway. She sped through the Hollywood hills, and turned off toward Van Nuys. The traffic thinned, and the neighborhood deteriorated. Illya stayed about a block behind her, fading farther back as there were fewer cars on the streets. Then she turned into an alley.

When they reached the spot they slowed, and Napoleon looked quickly down the narrow space between the brick buildings. The car was not in sight. Illya cramped the wheel hard right, and they swung into the alley. The noise of the street faded behind them as they bounced over the rutted pavement. A few moments later their motor coughed.

Illya pumped the gas pedal, but the engine sputtered and died. The radio faded and went silent. Illya worked the ignition key, but there was no sound from the starter. Napoleon's small automatic was nestling in his hand — this could be a bad place to be caught defenseless.

"That's odd," said Illya. "The battery seems to be dead." His expression changed just slightly as a thought grew in his mind. "Napoleon," he said softly, "would you look at your watch?"

Napoleon glanced at his wrist. "It's fourteen after three. Why?"

"No — *look* at your watch."

He did.

"Is it running?"

He kept looking at his watch, a frown spreading across his face. "No, it isn't. I must have gotten a bad battery" His voice trailed off.

Illya held up his wrist. "My watch is operating. Coincidence?"

Napoleon hit the door handle and started out. "Let's go out and see." Illya swung his door open and they hit the ground on opposite sides of the car. Hit the ground and stopped.

Two feet ahead of them stood the brunette, a totally unfeminine .45 automatic nestling in her dainty fist. "You two gentlemen will raise your hands and go quietly through the door. Mr. Solo, do something else with your gun."

Napoleon looked around vaguely, then slipped it into his coat pocket. She could certainly handle a car, and he didn't want to bet she couldn't handle the .45 equally well. He and Illya went through a dirty metal door at her direction and found themselves in what looked like the back room of an electronics laboratory.

Fluorescent tubes overhead cast a flat bluish light over solder-scarred workbenches, racks of equipment and chipped composition walls. A short, heavyset young man with a sour expression was standing beside one rack with two knobs, two meters and a toggle switch. The girl addressed him.

"All right, Frank. Turn it off and help me with these gentlemen."

Frank did things with the controls, and the red pilot light went out. Then he picked up a small drum of insulated cable and moved around behind Napoleon. When Solo's hands were secured to a convenient stanchion, Frank moved on and performed the same service for Illya. The girl's .45 vanished back into her purse as she checked the bonds. Then she spoke again.

"Their car is the blue sedan parked in the alley. Take care of it while I go find Kim."

The two left through opposite doors, Frank going into the alley and the brunette into another part of the building. Napoleon twisted around to look at Illya.

"Your watch is working — how long ago did Thrush let us go?"

"About eight and a half hours. And here we are again — though our captors this time don't seem to be Thrush."

Napoleon sighed. "Today just isn't our day. If we escape from this, we'll probably be captured by Boy Scouts or Martians next. Or run down by a reckless pedestrian." He looked around the laboratory. "You're right about this one not being a Thrush operation. This place is too messy for them."

"Also rather an amateurish capture. Thrush is usually more professional about such things, if often unnecessarily devious."

Napoleon thought a minute. "You know, I don't think I'd be at all surprised to find we'd been captured by DAGGER."

Illya considered this for a little while. "Well, I hope this *is* DAGGER."

"Why?"

"Because if it is, and this is an example of their efficiency, we have nothing to worry about," he said, pulling his right hand free of the cord that bound it, and setting to work releasing his left.

In a moment he was free, and seconds later Napoleon was rubbing his wrists and looking about the room. Illya was shaking his head sadly. "Shamefully amateurish," he said. "They left us armed, too."

He tried the alley door, and shook his head. "It seems there is a limit to their folly," he said. "The door is bolted. However..."

Napoleon tested the door the girl had used. It was locked, but flimsy. He looked at Illya. "Are we in a hurry?"

"Do we want to bring your girl friend and her pet automatic down on us?" Illya produced his U.N.C.L.E. transceiver and slipped up the antenna. "Channel D, please.... Channel D please." There was no response. Illya listened closely, then smiled wryly. "I should have expected it. We are well shielded."

By this time Napoleon had attached one of U.N.C.L.E.'s "skeleton keys" to the lock on the inner door. After listening carefully at the panel, and hearing no sounds to indicate the next room was occupied, he stepped back and twisted the ends of the wires together, touching off the detonator.

There was a spitting sound as the thermite ignited, and a dazzling glare lasting a few seconds. Acrid smoke filled the room, and billowed into the next as a well-placed foot opened the door.

Gun in hand, Napoleon looked around. Another room like the one they had just left; better lit, and cleaner. There was another door in the far wall, up a couple of steps, and they started toward it. It opened.

Standing in the doorway was a tall thin man. His hair was black and uncombed, his clothes unpressed. His face was long and his jaw narrow. His eyes were large, brilliant and intense; they lit his face like the eyes of a jack-o'-lantern. In the crook of his left elbow rested a crudely constructed circuit with a complex coil of some type pointing toward them — his right hand rested on a control knob.

"Don't raise your guns. Get against the wall or you will be snuffed out like two candles where you stand." His voice was flat and harsh with contempt.

Napoleon and Illya glanced at each other, and started to move apart. He was in an awkward position, some two feet above them, but if they could split his attention

"Back up to that wall," he said, an edge of anger creeping into his voice. "I should have killed you the first time I had a chance. Now you have forced the situation. I promised Garnet I wouldn't kill you unless I absolutely had to. But you will start to interfere soon if you are allowed to run free. If you had only stayed put until you could have been permanently suppressed, we would not be in this unfortunate impasse now...."

The two U.N.C.L.E. agents had been moving backward but for each step back they also took one to the side. The breadboarded circuit the tall man carried was swinging back and forth between them, its coil covering first one, then the other. Timing its oscillations, Napoleon waited until it had passed him and their captor's attention was on Illya. Then he sprang.

The circuit hummed softly, and Napoleon seemed to pause in mid-air. He didn't feel as if he'd hit anything, or anything had hit him, but all the breath seemed drained out of him. Time stopped, and he felt his arms and legs go numb. The room got dimmer, and the slow scraping of Illya's feet on the cement floor seemed far away. He seemed to be wrapped in yards of the finest and softest cotton wool, cutting off every sense. He sank deeper and deeper into it, vaguely aware that he was dying, but not really caring very much. There was no light, no sound, no feeling. He was sinking slowly in deep, dark, warm water which was filling his entire body. Only somewhere far in the back of his mind was a faint voice screaming that he had to get up and move. But there was no "up," and he no longer had a body to move....

Then his face hurt. There was rough concrete pressing into his cheek, and his shoulder felt bruised. He welcomed the pain — it meant he had a body again. His mind was trying to bury the memory of being without one, but it remained a small spot of icy terror. His hand scraped over the harsh

surface of the floor, feeling the fingertips rasping against it. There was a smash nearby, and the sounds of a scuffle. His eyes focused.

Illya had floored the tall man, and the jury-rigged circuit lay on the floor, broken. Napoleon pushed himself to his knees, breathing hard, and felt his face gingerly. There was blood on his cheek. He got to his feet.

"Freeze!" snapped a voice above him. He did. So did Illya.

"Let go of my brother!" The girl was back, and so was her .45.

Napoleon sighed. "Sometimes it all seems so futile...."

"Now back off, you two," she said angrily, gesturing with the gun. When they were a safe distance away, she knelt beside the tall man. "Kim, are you all right?"

He snapped something at her as he fumbled about on the floor with the pieces of the device he had dropped. He examined the breadboard carefully, and started picking up the components and trying to fit them back into it, like a child with a broken doll.

She looked down at him, an odd expression in her eyes. "Kim..." she said, "you told me that machine wouldn't affect people. Didn't it almost .. ."

"Shut up, Garnet! The one you asked about wouldn't — but I knew I could fix that. This was the first time I've gotten one with a wide enough Theta range. That's all it takes. Of course that other one wouldn't. Animals aren't electro-mechanical. It was useless except for stopping their silly machines. Now the first one that really *works* has been smashed by these pigs! It'll take *days* to fix it!"

"Kim!" Her gun drooped as she stared at him. He stood up, his eyes flaming with rage.

"Well, what's wrong with you? You swat flies! You slaughter vicious beasts!" His voice rose to a pitch of hysteria. "You pull noxious weeds and destroy bacteria! How can you defend these creatures? They're *animals* — dangerous animals. Why should they be left to pollute the earth with their presence?"

Garnet shrank back, her eyes shining with tears. "Oh, Kim — you've gone back to that! I thought you'd given it up. Please say you didn't mean that."

He laughed, harshly and bitterly, with a cold, rasping sound. Garnet stood up and said, "My poor Kim, you'll have to..."

He grabbed her by both arms and tried to throw her off balance into the next room. She struggled and hooked a heel behind his knee, causing him to stumble. He grabbed for the doorframe, and she brought up the big automatic, slapping him across the side of the head with it. He went down like a tree, and folded down the concrete steps.

With a choked sob, she knelt beside him and felt for a pulse. In a moment she stood up, waved the gun at Napoleon and Illya. "Come with me," she said. "We must get away from here before someone else comes. They'd never believe me."

She handed her gun to Napoleon and stared up at him with tear-filled, tortured eyes. "Please trust me. I've made a dreadful mistake, and I have many things I must tell you. But we must get away from here immediately."

Napoleon took the gun gently and handed it to Illya. Then he took Garnet's arm and helped her through the wreckage of the wooden door to the metal one. She found a key, and a moment later they were in the cool evening air of the alley.

Chapter 4: "He Really *Could* Destroy The World!"

Illya drove. Garnet was shaking too hard to start her car, and now she had dissolved into quiet hysterics in Napoleon's arms in the back seat. He watched her with acute concern mixed with embarrassment as she clung to him and sobbed for several minutes while he patted her shoulder and spoke softly and encouragingly to her.

Finally, when she seemed to have calmed down a bit, he fumbled out his handkerchief for her and he tried to open a conversation. "Ah — my name is Napoleon Solo. Are you Garnet Keldur?"

Her voice shook, but she managed to say, "Yes...I am. And I know who you are. And he's Illya Kuryakin. I saw you in New York." She finished wiping her eyes, and collected herself with a visible effort. "But...how did you find us so fast?"

"Professional secret. Look, do you feel like talking?"

"I...I don't..."

"Can you tell us what happened just now?"

"Well. . ." She cleared her throat. "Kim is my brother. He's got all the brains in the family, but he's...he's sort of disturbed. When we were in college, he developed emotional problems which got him involved with Nihilism. And he studied it until he was convinced it was the only solution to everything. Oh, lots of people feel this way when they discover some new philosophy, but Kim couldn't see anything else from then on.

"Mr. Solo, Kim is convinced the highest goal of knowledge is the destruction of humanity. To him, man is the most vile thing that ever existed on this planet. He used to say things like this, years ago. I — I thought he'd gotten over it and realized that people aren't really so bad after all. He stopped saying awful things like that about three years ago. He got a job for some kind of consulting organization up in San Francisco, and he was away from home a lot.

"Then about a year ago he showed up and told me he'd left his job because he'd discovered something he didn't want his company to take away from him. He said he had a perfect defense against the atomic bomb

— and he could even prevent all atomic warfare all over the world with this."

Napoleon caught a glance from Illya in the rear-view mirror. The Russian's eyebrows were arched in an expression of extreme skepticism. Napoleon looked at Garnet doubtfully. "Did he tell you anything about how it worked?"

"Oh, he explained the whole thing to me, and showed me the diagrams. I couldn't follow them, though — I only got as far as tensor analysis in math. My interests were more in humanities. It looked simple enough, though, and Kim is bright enough I'd take his word for it. And of course he showed me the demonstration of the first working model."

The car swerved slightly as the driver reacted. Napoleon decided to save the technical material until they were near a recorder and some technicians. He himself had stopped at integral calculus, and could remember little of that. No point in wasting her information on essentially deaf ears. "What did this have to do with Nihilism?" he asked.

"I thought he was over that," she said, sniffling into the handkerchief as her tears started to flow again. "I thought he'd just be stopping atomic warfare — but he wants to use it to stop all human life on earth! And he can!" Her voice broke. "He's my brother, Mr. Solo. We've got to do something to stop him, before he kills himself — and everybody else!"

* * *

"Now, Garnet, what is this — thing your brother invented, and what does it do?"

"He calls it an Energy Damper. He and a friend of his named Chernik built it together. Kim discovered the theories behind it. I don't know how it works."

Garnet, after a stiff drink, was a good deal calmer. She sat in one of the quiet comfortable rooms deep in U.N.C.L.E.'s Los Angeles office and spoke in an even, controlled voice. The reels of a tape recorder spun slowly, taking continuous note of questions and answers.

"He showed me the first experimental model about three months ago. It had a small field, but it proved his theories and showed them which way to work. He turned on a light bulb in a table lamp, and then turned on the little Energy Damper. The bulb got yellower and dimmer as he turned up the control, until it went out altogether. Then as he turned the control back down, it came back to life again.

"I have no idea how it works. Chernik explained it as a sort of field that inhibits the transformation of energy. When it was on the light bulb, the electrons were still flowing through the wire, but the electrical energy couldn't be transformed into radiant energy — heat and light."

Napoleon looked at an electronics technician who had come up from the labs to listen — he looked back, and shrugged elaborately.

"It's somewhere about three steps beyond Einstein's Unified Field Theory," he whispered, " and I don't understand *that!*"

"He found there was a quality he called Theta that governed the well, the speed of the transformation affected," Garnet continued. "A very small Theta would damp an atomic explosion. A larger one would also stop an electrical motor or dim a light bulb. Another step up would prevent a chemical explosion, like dynamite, or gasoline in a car engine. A higher one would put out a fire; and a fully open Theta would — theoretically — damp out the biochemical reactions necessary to life." She looked at Napoleon. "I guess it's not theoretical any more."

Napoleon grinned wryly. "No, it isn't. And as far-out as your story sounds, I will now be the last person in the world to doubt it. That thing he turned on me was set at the maximum Theta, I take it?"

"I don't know — it must have been, from your description of how it felt. And it was one of the heavy early models I used to stop your car with in New York."

"What were you doing in New York?"

She sighed. "There's so much to tell you — and it's not coming out in any kind of order. I'm sorry I'm so confused. I'll try to get myself a little better organized for you. Kim was able to convince a lot of people — some of them with money — that he had a machine that could prevent atomic war. And he got money for his experiments. He convinced them that this

had to be kept very secret, because there were a lot of powerful governments that would try to stop him and destroy his invention, because they needed the threat of atomic war to keep their people under control. You'd be surprised how many people really believe that! And Kim wanted to build one huge E/D with a non-directional field big enough to blanket the entire earth!

"He knew about U.N.C.L.E., and he got worried a few weeks ago about how much you knew about him. So he and I and Chernik and Holt — oh, Holt is another Nihilist friend of his; I'm sure he wants to destroy everything too — flew to New York. Kim talked to some people he knew there — people who have contributed to DAGGER. . ."

"DAGGER?" said Illya, sharply. "Is that your brother's organization?"

"It's not that much of an organization, really," she said. "Most of the people who are working for it think it's just against atomic war — since a dagger is a primitive and personal weapon. Kim was telling everyone there would be no more big wars. That he could even make gunpowder ineffective, and there'd be no power left but steam engines and everybody could go back to a leisurely life. And to people who didn't want this, he'd say he was just going to make atomic bombs non-functional, because a dagger was used as a weapon of defense in hand-to-hand combat. But there are people all over the country who think they know what he's doing, and are willing to work in secret to help him. But I think only Kim, and Chernik and Holt, *really* know what the master plan is.

"But as I was saying — Kim talked to some people he knew in New York and found out where you were going to be, Mr. Solo. And he told me to go out and watch for your car, and pull alongside and stop it, with the big E/D unit in the back seat. I don't know what he was doing at that time — I think he was going to see if there was anything in your apartment about him and the E/D. See, he couldn't get into U.N.C.L.E.'s headquarters, so..."

"Uh-huh. That's about what we thought it was," Napoleon said. "And that's why my wrist-watch was slow. The E/D field had stopped it."

"It shouldn't have done..."

"It's an electric wrist-watch — battery powered," he said. "Very expensive and very accurate, and guaranteed against everything. Except

Energy Dampers. What about the address you gave at the place where you rented the car? That gave us a little trouble."

"I don't know where it is, exactly. Kim just said I should leave that address, and not to worry about trying to use a different name because the address would be enough to throw you off."

"It almost did — permanently."

"Garnet," Illya asked, "you said Kim was working for a consulting organization when he developed this. Do you know anything about the company? Its name, location, size and so on?"

She pursed her lips and thought. "Something Associates. Parson? Person? Pierson — that was it. Pierson Associates. They're not very big, but they have some important contracts, I guess. They're in San Francisco."

Illya caught Napoleon's eye and nodded significantly. A Thrush front organization, as they had suspected. To Garnet he said, "They may be able to help us."

"I don't know. Kim was pretty definite about keeping away from them. He mentioned something about a breach of contract — he'd come up with the basic theories while working for them, and they wanted the rights. And he said nobody could be trusted with the secret. That's what he *said*, anyway. Now, I don't know what to believe. He could have been lying about everything."

"Except the Energy Damper," said Illya, softly.

Garnet nodded.

The technician spoke to her for the first time. "Misswouldn't it take a pretty large machine to generate enough of a field to cover the whole world? And how much power would it take? And how does it convert its power into the field once the field covers it?"

Garnet shook her head. "Last week they started working on a miniaturized version. It should generate a field a quarter of a mile across, and it can be carried in my purse. And this isn't *fully* miniaturized. I'd guess in a few more months of experimentation they could make one big enough — it'd probably be as big as a boxcar, but I know Kim. He'd be able to hide

it. As for power, I don't think it draws any kind of electric power. And once the field is established the E/D doesn't do anything but maintain it."

The technician looked at the floor and chewed the end of his right index finger. "That's not possible," he said flatly, as if he were trying to convince himself. "The field would have to be an unstable state, and it would take power to maintain it. There's a flaw in there. It wouldn't really work. It wouldn't." He looked at Napoleon. "It wouldn't. Would it?"

Expressionlessly, Napoleon held out his wrist with the electric watch visible. It was two minutes slow. The technician looked at it without really focusing his eyes. After a while he shook his head slowly. "I don't care if it works or not," he said. "It *still* isn't possible."

"The whole machine isn't possible," said Illya. "Personally, I believe color television to be impossible too. But since it does exist, I will act as if I believed in it. We must do the same for the Energy Damper."

The technician said softly, "He really *could* destroy the world."

Nobody said anything else for a few seconds.

"Garnet, do you have any idea what Kim is going to do now?"

"I don't know. He started talking with Holt a few days ago about a test of the new model — the miniaturized one. They wanted something *big*, something that would affect a lot of people. Kim is very sure nobody could connect him with it, and even if they did he has some places to hide that not even I know about."

Napoleon had the good taste to refrain from making an obvious remark about mad scientists and secret laboratories, but he was struck with the situation all the same.

Garnet continued hesitantly, "There was a road map on his desk last night and some figures about 300 miles. And he bought a canvas water-bag for a car."

Ralph Feldman sat quietly in a corner. He hadn't spoken during the interview so far, leaving that to those who knew more about what was going on. But now he did. "300 miles from Los Angeles — north would put him in Fresno, south in the middle of Baja California, and east would put him about Las Vegas. I'd bet on the last if he wanted to hit a lot of people."

"But how many people could he affect in a quarter-mile, even in the heart of the city? This sounds like he wants something *really* big."

"Boulder Dam," said Illya. "If he could knock that out, it would affect a large portion of Southern California."

Feldman nodded. "We'd better check any other possible places he could strike. But I think Boulder is the best bet. Any idea when he'd be planning to pull this 'demonstration'?"

"By this time he'll know I've — betrayed him." Her voice caught, but she went ahead. "He'll want to make it as soon as possible. It could be tomorrow. He didn't tell me about it at all — and he never thought I could figure anything out for myself — so he'll see no reason not to go right ahead with it."

Napoleon and Illya looked at each other and nodded. "I think we'd best go directly to Boulder Dam and wait for him."

"Or for some well-meaning character he could get to do the job for him," Napoleon said. "He *might* be recognized. But Garnet might also recognize one of his confederates." He turned to the girl. "Will you feel up to a short flight and a couple of days basking in the desert sun?"

She nodded hesitantly. "I'll have to get some clothes from home...."

"We can probably take care of that this evening. I don't think Kim will be coming back there — he'd expect us to be looking for him."

"Mr. Solo...they're...they're not likely to kill him, are they?"

Napoleon shook his head. "I don't think so, Garnet. But he may have to go to a hospital for a while."

"I know that — I've known it for a long time." She sighed. "Let's go."

Section II: "Give Me The DAGGER!"

Chapter 5: "The Most Fun By A Damsite."

The next morning there were three people mixed in the first elevator-load of tourists descending into the depths of Boulder Dam who attracted no attention from anyone but the uniformed guards. Napoleon Solo was resplendent in a white suit of faultless press; Illya had changed from his customary black to a more cheerful shade of midnight blue, with heavier dark glasses than usual in deference to the blazing desert sun; Garnet Keldur was completely casual in slacks and a loose blouse. Alone of the three, she was unarmed.

The guards around the dam had been alerted and briefed in the two hours before the powerhouse complex had been thrown open to the public. Rather than take more time than necessary with complex explanations, Napoleon and Illya had agreed to call the thing a "bomb" — after all, the effect would be just as disastrous if it were successfully planted and set off.

There were two elevators running the full height of the dam — the one on the north carried the tourists down and the one on the south brought them back up. The groups of twenty or so came through with a few minutes spacing between which gave the U.N.C.L.E. agents time to examine them for suspicious behavior. Garnet was stationed behind a window near the entrance to the first generator room, where she could see everyone who came through. If she recognized anyone, she could signal to Illya, who was watching the crowd inside the powerhouse.

Illya, in turn, could see Napoleon, who was lounging against a concrete wall out in the sunlight on the porch-like area before the face of the dam. He watched the groups of tourists in the central area, and followed them into the second generator house, on the Arizona side.

Lacking any more definite data, they were watching for anyone who might leave a box or bag of any kind anywhere in the area. Since there were usually some ten groups at various stages of the tour, this took a certain amount of constant attention.

Napoleon settled on letting his eyes rove constantly over every group in his range. It was well past lunchtime, and the sandwiches the guards had brought were not settling well. There were an amazing number of women with bulky purses in these groups — you'd think they wouldn't want to carry the big things with them on a tour like this. And lots of camera bugs hung about with equipment...He wondered if the thing could be made small enough to slip inside a camera body. He shook his head. *It's awkward,* he thought, *not knowing how big a thing it could be. But if I start thinking too small, I'll be looking for people leaving wads of chewing gum on things....*

* * *

He moved casually with a group into the cool darkness of the southern generator building. The guards had been advised to watch for anyone leaving or attempting to leave something — anything — around the area. But it felt good to get inside, out of that sun, for a little while.

Another group was coming out on the other side of the dam, though, and he had to get back outside to watch them. His feet were starting to hurt, too. This was what the detective story writers called "footwork," he guessed. It wasn't really his department — he preferred to work with the other end, mostly....

He saw Illya about a hundred feet away, looking out the door on his side of the dam. He seemed to be watching somebody.

A few seconds later Solo's transceiver whistled softly. He pulled it out and extended the antenna.

"Napoleon — that group out toward the end of the pier. There is a man in a loud shirt and a little straw hat. He has a camera around his neck and a large brown camera bag over his shoulder. There is something I don't like about him."

"You mean besides his taste in shirts? Did Garnet recognize him?"

"She wasn't sure. But Kim probably wouldn't send somebody she would know."

"Has he done anything yet?"

"Only take pictures. Wait a minute! He just took another picture out there in the sunlight!"

"Nothing wrong with that."

"But I've been watching him closely all the time, and he hasn't once used a light meter or opened his case for any reason. And that type of camera doesn't have a built-in meter. Also, I have not seen him make any adjustments of the camera between the dim light in here and the sunlight outside."

"Maybe he's just not a very good photographer."

"That's a good camera — and an expensive bag. Keep an eye on him when he comes over your way."

Napoleon's sighed. Better to be too suspicious than too trusting, he supposed. Here came the group. Now *there* was one worth watching. And she *did* look suspicious. Low-cut blouse, full skirt, big broad-brimmed hat and large dark glasses. And a big black purse. Napoleon still held the theory a woman's purse would be the best place to conceal it — and even if the purse were found and opened, no man would be likely to notice something as commonplace as an Energy Damper among all the stuff she probably had in there.

There was the photographer Illya was worried about. Nice camera, big gadget bag. But too obvious. If he left the bag somewhere, somebody would be sure to notice. And that loud shirt was a flagrant eye-catcher. He wasn't the pot-bellied loudmouth one usually associates with loud shirts, though — he was a little taller than average, rather pale, with light glasses and straight blond hair. A little overweight; round, innocent face. Looked as though he might have been a minister in a little rural church. Not at all the type.

Napoleon went back to watching the girl.

She behaved herself perfectly, and a few minutes later he shifted his attention to the next group. He didn't notice the girl again until her party emerged from the access tunnel to the penstocks. She still had the purse, but she had taken the dark glasses off. Could the E/D have been concealed in the glasses frames? Not likely....

A third group came out of the north powerhouse and stood blinking in the sunlight while the guard picked a bullhorn out of a small weather-proof

cabinet and addressed them.

Napoleon looked up the face of the dam. It seemed like a sheer wall of old ivory rising almost out of sight between the jagged rock sides of the canyon. Incongruously, far up the cliffs of concrete, there were two steel doors with outside handles barely visible. There was a constant breeze blowing up the canyon towards the dam, keeping the temperature reasonable. In the sun, protected from the wind, it was too hot; in the shade, the wind was chill. And the sun was beginning to disappear behind the cliffs. Napoleon shivered, and moved back inside the powerhouse.

The row of generators filled their huge cave with a penetrating subsonic song of pure power. Napoleon listened to it with his fingertips on the metal railing, and sighed. It was getting on toward three o'clock. He wondered what they would do if nobody showed up. Would they wait through tomorrow and the next day? Would they wait a week and then give up? Perhaps it was a wild goose chase. He leaned back against the wall and folded his arms.

There went the group with the girl, down the corridor into the dam, toward the elevator that would take them back to the surface, the highway, and civilization. And there was the man in the loud shirt, still with his fancy expensive camera...*And where was his camera bag?*

* * *

Napoleon stood up straight as the group went into the glazed tile corridor and out of his sight. He hurried around the corner and up the stairs. There they went.

There was a bend in the corridor, and his shoes skidded on the floor as he came around it at a run. The group was packing into the elevator, and near the front was the photographer. As he turned around, Napoleon saw clearly he was not carrying his gadget bag. The doors slid closed.

Napoleon whipped out his transceiver. "Illya! Contact the south elevator and have it stopped. I think our man is on it. It just took off."

There was no answer. He turned and headed down the corridor again. As he came into the generator house he thumbed the signal button again. Illya answered at once. "Were you signaling me a minute ago?"

"Yes. Get to a phone and contact the south elevator. Our pigeon is trying to fly. Have it sent back down here."

"I'm calling now." Illya's voice continued, more faintly, "This is Agent Kuryakin. We have reason to believe that the man we are after is in your elevator. Return to the bottom of the dam. Tell your passengers that you left somebody behind, or something that will not alarm them or upset the one we are interested in."

Napoleon said, "Then come on over here. I'll be meeting the elevator." He hurried back to the end of the corridor, and waited. Soon the air stopped sighing out between the closed doors, and a moment later they slid open.

There seemed to be a little consternation among the passengers as Napoleon raised his arms for their attention.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, ladies and gentlemen — ah, ladies and gentlemen?" They were all chattering among themselves, and only paused at his second bid for their attention.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, but we're afraid one of you may have inadvertently left something valuable around the dam." And then they weren't listening to him anymore, as they all started searching pockets and purses for their wallets, cards, and anything else that might have been lost and found. Napoleon paused with his mouth open until they settled down, then continued. "If the gentleman" — he pointed — "in the red and yellow shirt will step out, please, everyone else can go on to the top of the dam. Your camera case, sir," Napoleon said politely, as Illya came trotting up the corridor with three guards. "Sorry to have delayed you," he concluded to the remainder of the group in the elevator. "Thanks for your cooperation." The doors hissed closed and the two U.N.C.L.E. agents turned to the man in the loud shirt.

Illya said, "I'm afraid you may have lost your accessory bag during your tour."

The man looked blank for a moment, then his hand went to his side and an expression of surprise spread across his face. "Well — my gosh! How could that've happened? I sure thought I had it with me all the time. Did you find it?"

"We thought you might want to help us look," said Illya, staring him coldly in the eye.

He gave a nervous kind of laugh. "Well, I...I can't afford much time. But why all the fuss? It's sure too small for a bomb, fellas, and besides, I hardly have room for my lenses and film in there as it is." He laughed again, and did a little better at it.

It takes an expert to be able to laugh convincingly — and this man was not an expert. Napoleon felt a small glow of satisfaction, knowing that this was the end of the vigil, and it had indeed paid off.

Deep inside, a small voice whispered that he'd feel pretty foolish if it turned out this character had really only planted a bomb and they'd let the Energy Damper get away.... He shook off the thought.

Whatever was in the camera bag hadn't gone off yet — the lights were shining brightly and the generators still hummed. And the man was talking again.

"Now really, I can't stay much longer. It'll take me at least an hour to drive back to Vegas, and I've got to catch a plane at 4:30."

Illya answered him. "It has your valuable camera equipment in it. Surely you won't mind waiting until we find it. The lenses alone must represent a considerable investment."

"Well, sure, fellas, but I've got these plane tickets, and my wife'll be worried if I'm not back on schedule. Look, you can send the case to me C.O.D. when you find it — it's packed nice and solid." He reached for his pocket. "Here's my address."

"There will be another plane," Illya said. "You can wait here..."

The man's hand came out of his pocket with a pen, and a cloud of white smoke blasted out. Illya choked and doubled over. Napoleon grabbed for the man in the loud shirt, and got a face full of fog. He was holding his breath, but it squirted in his eyes and in a moment he was blinded with tears. He could hear the guards struggling, then a fist hit flesh and there was a grunt of pain.

A moment later he felt a hand on his arm and heard the voice of a guard, strained as if through clenched teeth. "Mr. Solo — I think my foot's

busted. But I can see okay. Help me and I'll guide you to the phone."

"Which way?" asked Napoleon, feeling for the man's arm.

"This way — a little to the right.... It's about fifty feet."

"How's my partner?"

"I dunno. He's on the floor, but he's still moving. I guess he really got a faceful of that stuff. Louie's helpin' him."

"Where'd the other guy go?"

"He ran off toward the penstock hatch. Wall's about five feet in front of you — that's it. Phone's ten feet to the right...here. Lemme dial."

Solo's vision was beginning to clear a little. As the guard's weight shifted, he was able to raise a hand to wipe his burning eyes. The guard spoke into the phone.

"Bill — close the elevators and get the tourists out. Watch out for a guy in a loud sport shirt, red and yellow mostly. He's got a big camera around his neck, looks like a regular tourist. He just gassed these two U.N.C.L.E. guys and me and Louie got bashed up a little too. He headed for the penstocks about two minutes ago.... Okay.... Right. I can make it to the first-aid kit. Yeah. Thanks."

He hung up, and looked closely at Napoleon. "You can see again?"

Napoleon shook his head to clear it, and said, "Well enough. Where's this first-aid kit? I can navigate myself — you want to stay here?"

The guard looked down, and said, "I — I think I'd better. Lemme down easy, now..."

Napoleon did, and got directions to the nearest first-aid station. He found the green metal box and brought it back. The guard got out bandages and a small splint. Napoleon took the box on to where Illya was now sitting up, gasping for breath. He unshipped the small green sphere and a plastic mask, fitting it over Illya's nose and mouth.

"Hold this, and breathe deeply."

Illya did, and in a minute or two the oxygen had flushed his lungs and revived him completely. His eyes were running and bloodshot, but his breathing was easy as he got to his feet.

"Caught like an amateur," he said bitterly. "I inhaled just as he fired the gas." He looked around. "Don't tell me you let him get away!"

"Temporarily," Napoleon admitted; "but the top of the dam has already been closed off, so he'll be trapped."

"Only theoretically. Let's go."

They hurried down the long rugged tunnel carved out of natural rock to the little softly-lit room which afforded a view of the penstock tunnel. It was empty. The tunnel beneath the room ran off into darkness in both directions, and the huge pipes within it lay like the pulsing veins of an unimaginably huge animal. A red and yellow shirt would have stood out even in the dim light of the tunnel. And as Illya looked carefully down, it did.

The shirt was draped over a stanchion a fair distance below them. It was no longer occupied. Their man had ducked in here, removed the shirt that had personified him to everyone, and stuffed it through the little access hatch at the side. But for the opportune intervention of the structural member, it would have fluttered to the bottom of the tunnel and remained undiscovered for years. Now...well, now all they had to do was look for a man who *wasn't* wearing a bright shirt.

They headed out the rockwalled tunnel again.

Guards were running about, and tourists were standing in nervous groups like sheep whose herd-dogs had suddenly taken to strange behavior. Napoleon took command.

"Attention, please! Will all the tourist groups please line up along that wall. Guards come over here."

They did. While Napoleon told the guards what they had found, Illya quickly scanned the faces of almost a hundred tourists — groups that had piled up since the elevator was stopped. Their man was not among them.

Garnet came running up at last. "Napoleon — I think he might be over on the north side. I saw somebody in a white tee-shirt coming out of a little tunnel door."

Leaving most of the guards with orders to send the tourists out by elevator and continue searching the Arizona side of the dam, Illya and

Napoleon took four men and headed for the Nevada border, a hundred feet away. Garnet showed them the door.

"Yeah, he could've," said a guard. "That goes down and under the whole front of the dam. Dunno how he'd know about it, though. I guess he's no regular tourist."

"You can say that again," said Napoleon. "And that was no regular bomb he planted either, so don't worry about it exploding. What he planted not only won't explode, it'll prevent anything else from exploding too."

The guards stared at him strangely. "Don't worry about it," Napoleon repeated. "We've got to find that man."

"Mr. Solo," Garnet said, "hadn't we better concentrate on finding the E/D? Even if we catch the man, he probably won't know how to turn it off, and I'm sure he wouldn't tell us where it is."

Solo looked at her. "Garnet," he said, "you have a gift for going right to the heart of things." He turned to the guards. "Look," he said, "catching the man won't do us as much good as finding that thing before it goes off. I want you all to spread out and cover every tunnel, every room, every trash basket, every corner big enough to leave a wad of paper in. What you're looking for is probably a brown gadget bag, about so by so by so." He gestured with his hands. "And if you find it in time, we may still be able to save Southern California — and all your jobs."

They went.

Chapter 6: "But He Left His Glass Slipper."

Napoleon, Illya and Garnet retired to the office of the head of the maintenance department. Here they found maps showing the entire honeycomb of tunnels that filled the mountain of concrete that was Boulder Dam. The phone rang every few moments, as guards called in to say they had just finished searching some particular area. Illya would mark it off with a red line on their map, and Napoleon would direct the guard to another area.

Half an hour passed. The tourists had all been cleared out of the dam and the area around had been evacuated. The searchers had found neither the camera case nor any sign of the man who had left it. They could have vanished together into thin air. Then the phone rang. Napoleon answered it.

"Solo — Good! Where? Dont move it. We'll be right there." He hung up and turned to the map. "There we are," he said. "Come on. We may be able to disarm that thing yet."

* * *

The case lay behind some boxes in a small cul-de-sac about the center of the dam, near the bottom. Since the tour went nowhere near there, the man must have planted it somewhere, probably the penstock-viewing room, and then picked it up and moved it to this safer place while on the run. And he might have re-set the timer to give himself more time, or to go off sooner. They had no way of knowing but had to expect the worst.

"I've looked it over carefully, Napoleon, and I think it should be reasonably safe to move it. Handle it carefully; there might be a sensitive trigger inside."

Since Illya's eyes had not recovered from the blast of tear gas, Napoleon now was the only one to carry the device out of the area and away to safety.

The north elevator sat at the bottom of the shaft, door open. Napoleon got in, the camera case hanging from its strap beside him, and pushed the top button. He waved to Illya between the closing doors.

The elevator started its long trip upward.

It was some seven hundred feet up the elevator shaft, and it took the elevator about a minute to make the climb under ordinary circumstances. But to Napoleon Solo it was seven miles, and took an hour.

He was aware of the silent menace in the leather case, of the immense mass of concrete around him, of the shaft extending up and down from his little steel cage. And he felt very much alone.

There were access doors every couple hundred feet along the shaft, and if the E/D went off in the elevator, the automatic mechanical brakes would still function to hold him where he was. Then a rope could be let down from the next door up, so he wasn't in any real danger....

If was still a long, long way to the top. The wall crawled endlessly past him, and the closed doors slipped from the top to the bottom of the frame and disappeared every now and then. The only sound was the hum of the air-conditioner and the sighing of displaced air in the shaft. Napoleon glanced at the light and realized that the climb on the rope ladder (should the thing go off before he reached the top) would have to be managed in total darkness.

How long had he been in the elevator, now? It seemed like forever since Illya had disappeared between the doors as they'd slid closed at the bottom of the dam....

And then another door slid into his field of vision, moved down, slowed, matched with his own, and stopped. The door slid open. Hot, blue desert daylight flooded into the little anteroom outside the elevator and made him squint.

He stepped out through the doors and picked up the telephone. He dialed the extension at the bottom. Illya answered in the middle of the first ring.

"Yes?"

"Made it. I'll get this thing to the car, and you come on up with Garnet."

"We'll be right up."

Napoleon hoisted the bag to his shoulder and sauntered out into the sunlight.

* * *

Ten minutes later he was at the wheel of their car with Garnet beside him, climbing through the tangled hills toward the road back to Las Vegas. Illya sat in the back seat, holding the camera bag on his lap. There was a dour Russian look of triumph in his bloodshot eyes. Garnet had suggested looking inside to be sure it really was the Energy Damper, but Illya had vetoed it.

"It would have been easy to wire a small explosive charge to go off in the hands of anyone trying to open the case. Or to close the circuit of the Energy Damper. Besides, our superior officer, Mr. Waverly, likes things handled neatly and would be most upset if we tampered with the object in any way under these circumstances."

It was now late afternoon, and the sun was coasting down the western sky to quench its fire in the Pacific Ocean a few hundred miles west. There was still an hour or two of daylight left, and with any kind of luck, Napoleon thought they would be back in Los Angeles with their prize tonight and sleep comfortably while the lab gang sweated for a change.

He was wrong. There is another kind of luck besides good luck.

None of them noticed the light plane that hummed out of the sun to their left. Illya looked up when it started circling low over the road ahead of them. Then it came roaring down the road straight toward them at an altitude of about thirty feet. An insignia was visible in the fraction of a second it flashed overhead, blazoned black-on-white on the wings and side of the plane — a taunting insignia. A stylized bird, wings raised in defiance and beak open. A Thrush.

Napoleon sat low in the seat, and Illya leaned forward to push Garnet to the floor. She objected only momentarily, then dove and curled up under the dash in comparative safety. Illya cranked down his back window and started clipping the long barrel and shoulder stock to his powerful automatic pistol.

The little airplane zoomed off over the desert, circled and started back. Illya clipped the telescopic sight to the top of his gun as the plane came tearing over the barren ground, perpendicular to the highway this time, to

pass about seventy feet ahead of them. He fired several shots, but it was impossible to gauge the relative speeds accurately. Suddenly a row of dust-spurts shot up along the sand to their left like the footprints of a charging invisible centipede. The line chattered across the road ahead of them and into the sand on the other side. The car swerved slightly as the airplane roared overhead again and the wheels bounced on the strip of pavement chewed up by the steel-jacketed machine-gun slugs.

Illya rested the arm holding his weapon on the window sill and sighted on the plane as it circled again to their right and started back toward the highway. He squeezed off four shots as it approached, correcting for the decreasing range. But either it was armored or the motion of the car was throwing his aim off, because his shots seemed to have no effect.

This time he could clearly see the snout of the Thompson protruding from the side window of the plane. It flickered fire, and the line of impact scampered across the dirt directly toward them.

At the last moment Napoleon tapped the brakes and the shots tore into the highway only a few feet ahead of them. Then the front of the car made a sound like a garbage can hit with a baseball bat, and swerved wildly.

Illya was thrown off balance as the car slewed off the highway. The gun went out the window as the top of the frame swung over and violently down.

Napoleon wrestled with the wheel in an effort to keep the car upright — it is no joke to have a front tire practically disintegrated at ninety miles an hour, just as you apply the brakes.

Garnet hugged her knees to her chest and braced her feet against the front seat, but even so was bounced about like a marble in a bottle.

The car had cleared the ditch in a fraction of a second, and now was tearing a swath through sagebrush and mesquite — still more or less frontwards, but sometimes almost sideways as Napoleon fiercely fought the skidding and tried to brake. There was no traction on the loose sand for brakes or accelerator. The steering was doubtful at best. Nevertheless, Napoleon somehow managed to keep some amount of control over the car by sheer effort of will, and after an indefinite length of time leaping about the sand dunes it lurched sideways and came to rest against a large bush.

With one wheel flat and another in a sandhole it leaned against the brush like a winded horse, its engine gasping.

The Thrush plane circled a thousand feet above, a vulture over the carcass of the car. Something small and black detached itself from the side of the plane and seemed to hang in mid-air, growing slightly larger. Then it split into two pieces which continued to grow.

No one below saw it. Illya was dazed from the blow on his head, Napoleon was recovering from his fight with a ton of careening steel, and Garnet was struggling to get out from under the seat.

Neither did anyone in the car see the two black shapes suddenly sprout great white canopies.

The two Thrush agents landed within fifty feet of the car. One was carrying the Thompson in ready position all the way down, watching for signs of resistance. There were none.

Chapter 7: "Call It Egotism, But I Think We're Worth More Alive."

The first thing Garnet saw when she got her head above the level of the dash made her wish she hadn't. Two men in brown business suits were walking toward them across the sand. And the sub-machine gun one was carrying showed they meant business.

"Napoleon..." she said.

He didn't answer, but she saw his eyes flick toward the advancing figures and then back to her. His hand on her shoulder ordered her back to the floor. She sighed and curled up again, favoring a bruise on her side.

Illya sat up and looked. "Maybe if we act friendly..."

Napoleon opened the door on his side and climbed slowly out, hands extended. Illya got out the back door at the same time. The Thrush with teeth stood back some thirty feet while the other approached Napoleon.

He looked at the car, bent over to examine the front wheel, then straightened. "Nice piece of driving, Mr. Solo — we appreciate it. Our little prize should not have been damaged at all."

"Now, just what is it you're..."

"Can it, Solo!" the Thrush snapped. "We want that brown camera bag you have in the back seat. We don't want to have to hurt you or Kuryakin or the girl. So just get us that bag."

"I don't really..."

"You have no choice. *Get it!*"

Illya reached slowly back into the car. He dragged the case out by its strap and held it at arm's length. "Call it egotism," he said, "but I think we're worth more alive. What shall I do with it?"

"Call it good sense. Walk to a place about halfway between me and my friend and place it gently on the ground. Then walk back to the car."

Illya did. Napoleon made no move. In a movie, he thought, Garnet would have crept out the door on the far side of the car, and would come up behind the Thrush with the machine gun and clip him over the head with a large rock, whereupon Napoleon and Illya would attack the other one. But

this was not a movie. Unfortunately, Garnet was probably hiding under the dashboard, waiting for the sound of machine gun fire.

The talkative Thrush stepped carefully over to the leather bag and looked at it without touching it for a moment. Then he looked around and said, "Mr. Solo — take your gun out very slowly with your left hand thumb and forefinger and toss it away."

Napoleon did. "Now that you have us completely disarmed," he said, "will you fly over and drop a bomb on us?"

"There are times when the idea of shooting a helpless man seems very attractive. Keep your mouth shut and we can resist the temptation. Now turn around and lie down on your face."

Napoleon was still secretly expecting Garnet to do *something* — but in the meantime he wasn't wearing a bulletproof vest. He lay down.

"Now stay there until you hear us take off."

The small plane had landed on the highway a couple hundred feet away, and the two Thrushes picked up the brown bag between them and started for it. The motor was still turning over as they hopped into the open door. The propeller spun into a blur and the little craft shot off down the deserted highway and into the air with a roar.

Napoleon lifted his head and saw the plane climbing into the blue dome of the sky. It rose higher and higher, turning toward the northwest. Before it was out of sight, he was in radio contact with the U.N.C.L.E. branch office in Las Vegas.

Sure enough, Garnet was still under the dash.

"Oh, *there* you are," said Napoleon brightly.

She looked up at him doubtfully. "Where should I have been?"

He sighed. "Never mind. There'll be a truck from town here in half an hour or so." He looked at Illya, who was coming back from a walk across the desert gathering up guns — both his and Napoleon's would need a good cleaning before they'd be safe to use again.

"All right," he said. "You wouldn't be smiling that inscrutable smile if you hadn't just done something very dirty to someone. Let us in on the

secret. I thought you were pretty agreeable to our feathered friends. I suppose the bag is full of rocks and the E/D is under the back seat?"

"Napoleon!" said Illya, shocked at the very idea. "I'm shocked at the very idea. That would have been misrepresentation. And besides, they would have looked in the bag as soon as they could and then come back. I just gave them what they wanted."

Napoleon didn't say anything. When Illya was like this it meant he was terribly pleased with himself, and would eventually tell the whole story without prompting. He just enjoyed being prompted.

After a while Illya gave up waiting and went on. "In fact, I gave them a little extra. Down in the crack where the strap joins the body of the case there is a little bonus. I suggest as soon as we get back to Las Vegas we take advantage of their sensitive receivers to check on the signal from our tracer — which Thrush is presently carrying directly to their nearest headquarters, where we can reclaim the merchandise at our leisure."

Napoleon nodded. "That's very good, Illya. You'll win your stripes yet, at this rate. I'm proud of you."

Illya made a face at him, and the two of them settled down in the car to clean their guns.

* * *

An unsteady tone came whispering out of the large speaker above a rack of electronic equipment. There was a roaring and hiss of highly amplified random noise surrounding it, and the muted thunder of electrons boiling off cathodes and spattering through grids rose and fell around the tone like surf around a seagull's cry.

On the huge map table a straight line of grease pencil lay across a plastic overlay which projected a map of Nevada, Arizona and California. A second line was being laid in along a straightedge.

The man plotting it extended the line until it intersected the first, then straightened up.

"Still going," he said. "Same speed, same course. I wonder if San Francisco has picked them up yet." He stepped back and motioned to Illya

and Napoleon. "We'll be losing the signal in a few minutes. They're over Kings Canyon now." He checked the wall clock and wrote a time beside the intersection point. "They must have changed planes in Death Valley. This one's got about 35,000 feet, and the one you described probably wouldn't be able to handle that."

A phone buzzed, and he answered. "Foss.... Yeah? What?...Oh well, not surprising. Thanks." He hung up. "Air Defense reports they have a routine flight plan filed for the bird we're tracking — it's a private plane and it's bound for Vallejo. Everything perfectly regular."

"That's Thrush," said Napoleon, philosophically.

The tone was fainter, but still definite. A teletype clicked in the corner, and Illya looked at it. "San Francisco has them, faint but clear."

"Course, speed, location?"

Illya read off a string of numbers, and the plotter nodded. "Good. Will you want to fly to San Francisco tonight? If so, you'd better arrange for tickets as soon as — "

The signal stopped.

"— you can."

"I guess so," said Napoleon. "We just lost the signal."

The plotter was looking at a couple of meters and frowning. "Yeah...they probably went behind a mountain."

The teletype rang a little bell and began to natter to itself. Illya looked, and raised an eyebrow. "They want to know if the subject has turned back. They lost the signal suddenly a few seconds ago." He smiled a secret smile.

Napoleon looked at him oddly for a moment, then broke into a grin. The plotter looked puzzled, and spoke, "Uh...they were right about here when it cut off," he said, circling an area on the map in blue. "Somewhere south of Shaver Lake. Do you think..."

"We're sure of it," said Napoleon Solo.

About ten o'clock the next morning an unmarked helicopter took off from Fresno and clattered northeast into the mountains. At the controls sat Illya Kuryakin. Operating a small directional receiver in the seat next to

him was Napoleon Solo. And straight ahead of them some thirty miles was Shaver Lake.

The receiver in Solo's lap was already starting to pick up the signal from the tracer Illya had planted in the camera case the previous afternoon, but the battery was beginning to weaken. It took a lot of power to broadcast a signal readable for 500 miles.

Conversation was difficult over the noise of their flight. Napoleon tapped Illya on the shoulder, gave him a thumbs-up signal, and pointed ahead and down.

The blue waters of the mountain lake appeared ahead of them as the little community of Pineridge slipped beneath. Napoleon waved the directional antenna in his hand over the horizon, and tapped Illya again. Under his control, the 'copter swerved a few degrees toward the east and began to descend. They passed over the lake and over a craggy hill.

The signal grew stronger. Napoleon felt a bit of relief — there had been a chance that the signal source might be under water, and it would cost them some time to retrieve it. Apparently it was back in the woods, and their luck was holding.

Some distance ahead the pines were interrupted by blazes of white — freshly broken treetops, shattered as if by some huge scythe. Illya shouted over the roar of the motor. "There it is!"

Napoleon nodded.

The helicopter racketed over the spot and went into a tight circle. Below was the crumpled wreckage of a light plane — not the one that had attacked them the day before, but a sleeker, faster model. Both wings had been sheered off by trees — probably the same ones that now stood shattered to mark the last meteoric moments of the airplane.

Illya gunned the engine and began to climb. At five thousand feet they could see no convenient clear space for a landing. Napoleon got the rope ladder out while Illya brought their craft down to treetop height and adjusted it to hover.

The ladder uncoiled its length through the door and fell, jerking and twisting in the downblast from the whirling blades, to the ground. As it

came to rest, Napoleon backed out the door and started down some fifty feet.

The rope ladder swayed and swung him about like an ornament on a light cord, and the wind whipped at his clothing as he clambered down the wooden rungs. The helicopter hung above him, bouncing and slipping to either side in the wind as Illya fought to keep the machine steady.

Coat flapping, Napoleon leaped the last few feet to the ground, about twenty yards from the wreckage of the plane. He knew about what he expected to find as he looked through the shattered glass of the door — there were three bodies, and not neat ones. The crash had been bad. He looked away and took a couple of deep breaths, then planted a foot on the side of the fuselage and jerked at the door with both hands.

It gave a little, but not enough. He kicked hard at the frame around the latch, jarring it loose, and tried again. He gripped the latch handle and strained back against it; it gave a little, then with an ear-aching screech of strained metal the whole door came away in his hands and he fell backwards across the carpet of dirt and pine needles that made the forest floor. The door landed on top of him, with a painful crack across the forehead. Napoleon considered the situation, and decided that anyone with less patience would probably swear.

He got to his feet again, tossing the door aside, and glanced up. Illya was directly above him, so the body of the helicopter would have concealed the embarrassing incident. Napoleon decided to say nothing about it.

He took a few more deep breaths, and looked inside the cabin of the plane.

In the co-pilot's seat was a man in a brown suit. He had the remains of a Thompson sub-machine gun in a badly shattered case near his feet. He too was badly shattered.

So was the other brown suit in the back seat. He was not easily recognizable, but was probably the spokesman of the team. Thrush had lost a couple of good agents and a pilot.

In the fourth seat, firmly strapped in, lay the tan camera case.

Napoleon smiled a grim smile as he reached across the ruin of the second Thrush agent and unfastened the strap around the bag. The zipper

was still closed.

He pulled the bag out. Thrush had really let themselves in for it this time — as expected, the E/D apparently had had a timer built in. It had gone off in the plane in mid-fight.

The engine had been killed, as had the signal from the tracer. The Thrush pilot, unable to restart the engine, had probably been trying to either glide to Shaver Lake for a water landing, or perhaps even into Fresno. But in the dusk, unable to see the ground clearly, none of his instruments functioning, the mountains had come up to meet him. There was a fair probability that they had never known what hit them.

Then luck had stepped in on U.N.C.L.E.'s side — the impact had damaged the Energy Damper, and the signal from the practically indestructable tracer had started again. The power for the long-range transmitter was beginning to fade after about seventeen hours, but there had been enough to guide them directly to the spot. *Score one for our side,* Napoleon thought, as he slung the camera case over his shoulder and started back up the ladder to the helicopter.

An U.N.C.L.E. T-33 jet was waiting for them at Fresno Airport, and less than an hour later they were in Los Angeles. Napoleon had radioed Feldman the situation, and waiting at this airport were a long-range jet, tanks full and engine warm; Garnet Keldur, just off the plane from Las Vegas; and Ralph Feldman, who greeted them as they stepped out of the T-33.

"Glad you made it back. Your fresh horse and one passenger are all ready to take off, as per your request, as they say. Both are fully fueled and good for the full distance to New York. I relayed the story to Waverly; he said if the gadget was damaged he'd have your heads. By the way — before you take off, could I possibly see the thing that's caused all this fuss?"

"It's inside here," said Illya, holding up the bag. "It may be wired to explode, so we'd rather not open it."

"Oh, I don't need to see the works. I just wanted to be a little impressed that something that small could do everything this is supposed to be able to do — and inspire all this chasing around. What's it weigh?"

Illya hefted it experimentally. "About ten pounds."

Feldman shook his head in amazement, and said nothing for a moment. Then he collected himself and said, "Well, give my regards to Broadway — and Waverly, too. You'll have to justify the expense for this private jet to him."

"Absolute necessity," said Napoleon. "The thing is quiet now, but if it should act up on an airliner and cause a crash, we'd all be terribly embarrassed. As well as dead. And there'd be a lot of innocent bystanders dead with us. This way, we'll have a parachute hooked to the thing from the minute we take off. We'll put Garnet beside it next to the hatch, and if it goes off and kills the engine, I yell to her, and she kicks it out. Then we can start up again, and go back and rescue it later with a horse, or a dog team, or something it won't put out of action."

Feldman nodded. "A good plan," he said. "Simple, practical, and effective."

"And mine," said Illya.

"Of course," said Napoleon, honestly.

Chapter 8: "Looks As If They've Got It Working."

It was early evening in New York. Waverly had not been at the airport to greet Napoleon, Illya and Garnet, but he had sent a car with orders to bring them directly to his office.

Outside what appeared to be a window, the United Nations building was a sparkling column against the darkening sky, and the lights on the river were brighter than the few stars that had begun to appear.

Waverly turned away from the view as his door opened, and two agents and a friend entered.

They carried a light brown camera bag directly to the swivel-mounted table and set it down, then took seats as Waverly ambled over, tamping his pipe.

"So this is your infernal machine, eh?" He looked it over carefully. "Not especially impressive. Had a look inside?"

"Not yet, sir. In case it might be booby-trapped, we thought we'd leave the surprises to the lab crew."

Waverly nodded absently and fumbled for a match. "Mr. Kuryakin, would you ring for a messenger to take this thing to the laboratory? They're expecting it."

To Waverly, lighting his pipe was a five-minute vacation from his job. He expected to spare no concentration from it, and took pains to be sure everything else was taken care of before he started. His staff was aware of this, and took equal caution not to interrupt him in the midst of this ritual.

Before the ancient briar was smoldering to his satisfaction, the messenger had come, been given the case, and departed without a word. At last an even glow came from the bowl of the pipe, and an unsteady streamer of aromatic smoke rose toward the air-conditioner. Waverly extinguished his fourth match and leaned up to the table.

"The laboratory has been given all the data in your rather spotty reports," he said. "I would like a complete coverage on everything that has happened since you left Las Vegas, and then we will go over your reports for detail. Incidentally, Miss Keldur, allow me to offer the thanks of this

organization for your courageous cooperation. Anything you can add to these reports will be most welcome."

"Well, while Napoleon and Illya were off recovering the Energy Damper, I flew straight to Los Angeles. I met Mr. Feldman there, and told him all that had happened — as Illya had explained it to me. I was a little confused at the time — I'm still not quite sure what this 'Thrush' is — but I just waited there. And about one o'clock they came flying in with the camera bag, and we took off for New York. That's all I can add right now. Oh — the E/D was perfectly quiet through the whole trip."

"I think," said Illya, "it must have been damaged in the crash. The field seems to have been cut off about that time, judging from the tracer signal."

"Well, I suppose something would have had to have been disconnected to make it safe to transport. I only hope it was not damaged beyond all repair. Mr. Solo, describe the site of the crash, and everything you can remember about the crash and your recovery of the — ah — Energy Damper."

Napoleon leaned back and closed his eyes. He began with the first pickup of the signal from the tracer, described the terrain as they had approached, covered the brief search for a landing place, and gave a moment-by-moment account of his time on the ground. When he came to a description of the bodies, he opened his eyes for a glance at Garnet, and said, "I saw no evidence they had died any other way than the obvious. They were inrather unpleasant condition. Do you need details?"

Waverly puffed his pipe a moment, and said, "Not now. Leave them in the final report, though."

Napoleon closed his eyes again and finished. He did not omit anything, including his struggles with the door. He heard a muffled giggle from Garnet, and a snort from Waverly, but did not pause.

At length he finished the report, sat up and opened his eyes. "All right?"

Waverly nodded. "Mr. Kuryakin — any additions, corrections or comments?"

Illya thought. "None, sir."

"Now," said Waverly, producing a manila folder from somewhere, "here are copies of your preliminary reports. I'm not fully satisfied with the material contained in them. For instance, what was done in the way of surveillance on the electronics shop in Van Nuys where you were captured the, ah, second time?"

"All the public records on the property have been checked out," Illya said immediately. "Feldman should be forwarding a complete report to you. He had also posted a guard on the building, although it was nearly cleaned out by the time we accomplished this."

Waverly nodded. "Have you checked for any witness to your...arrival in that park?"

The interrogation continued for some time, as Waverly acquainted himself with every detail of the situation and his agents' actions. He made no comments beyond an occasional nod of acknowledgment, and he took no notes. When he had every detail from Napoleon and Illya, he turned to Garnet.

"Now, Miss Keldur, I must confess to some mystification as to the exact nature of this...Energy Damper. I am told you know more about it than anyone except the inventor and the builders."

Garnet repeated her description of the demonstration Kim had given her, and Napoleon recalled as well as he could his own feelings within the maximum Theta field — though the memory gave him a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. He could face death in a fight, with excitement and adrenaline surging through his bloodstream, or the quick death of assassination or explosion, or any of the other deaths he faced regularly in line of duty. But that draining away of existence was a feeling he had no desire to repeat, and a death he would greatly prefer to avoid.

Waverly inquired again into details of the financing of the DAGGER project, interested in how a small group of fanatics could raise cash to the extent this would obviously require.

Garnet was vague. "I have no idea what approaches he used. I know he and Holt would laugh sometimes about the gullibility of people. He was able to convince them it had to be kept very secret, though. So they gave

Kim their money through a system of covers I never found out anything about.

"Of course, I guess Kim — and Chernik and Holt, and a couple of others — were the only ones who really planned to get rid of civilization entirely. And I think a lot of them were thinking along the lines of preventing all kinds of *chemical* explosions — from gunpowder to gasoline engines — and sending the whole world back to the steam age. Or maybe even making fire impossible, so everything would go to a really primitive level — I know one fellow, not by name though, who was sure this would force everyone to go back to nature and beI think his words were 'closer to God.' But Kim, and Chernik and Holt, are going to"

Suddenly the room went dark.

The air-conditioner's hum fell to a mutter and went silent. The only illumination in the room was a faint glow from Waverly's pipe and the light of the city reflected back from the sky and through the window.

Garnet broke off with a gasp of surprise. Waverly fumbled for a moment; then a match flared, throwing his face into sharp, ruddy relief. At the same time, Napoleon flipped his cigarette lighter and looked down.

"My watch has stopped," he said matter-of-factly.

Illya said, "Looks as if they've got it working."

Waverly poked absent-mindedly at his intercom and called his secretary's name twice before he realized, and broke off with an embarrassed snort. Napoleon was checking the door, which would not open automatically. He found the manual emergency latch, and the door ground reluctantly open.

Out in the corridor there was confusion. Somebody was saying, "The emergency generators, dammit, where are the emergency generators? They held up for twelve hours in the blackout last week — where are they now?"

The secretary was tapping at the buttons on her telephone by the light of the desk-type cigarette lighter which threw a butane flame four inches high — and was the only light in thirty feet. People were starting to cluster around the desk like moths, asking questions of each other.

"Are *all* the lights out?" "I think *everything's* out!" "My flashlight doesn't work." "Hey, Helen, where's the fuse box?" "All right, Manny, what did you do this time?" "I didn't do it — I was in Kansas City at the time and I've got twelve witnesses to prove it."

Waverly cleared his throat loudly and with authority. "Attention, please — attention. This is the result of a highly classified experiment in our technical section. The condition was not wholly unexpected, and should end in a few minutes. Return to your sections, please, and occupy yourselves there with whatever questions most concern you."

By the uncertain light of matches and cigarette lighters, the personnel made their ways back to their various offices while Waverly muttered to himself about the remarkable dependence everything showed on electricity. He told his secretary to lay in a stock of candles on each floor, and was starting to talk about putting voice tubes like those on a ship between key points for emergency communication, when the lights came back on again.

"Very good," said Illya, consulting his spring-wound watch. "Eleven and one half minutes." He looked at Napoleon and added, "If you wish to re-set your watch, the time is exactly 9:35 and...forty seconds. Mark."

"Oh, ye gods," said the secretary suddenly. "We'll have to get every clock in the building re-set. And the time-clocks....And what about the radio reports we've missed? Station Jay's weekly..."

The complaints and worries faded off as Waverly led his small party to the elevator. The four of them stepped in, and he touched the bottom button.

Thirty seconds later the doors slid back and they stepped into the midst of a babble of confusion.

"Shot!" one man was exclaiming. "Seventy-two hours of careful examination shot! What a rotten, *rotten* time to blow the power!"

"Yeah? Well, this condenser has been annealing for a day and a half, and now I'll have to go back and recast the whole thing. Pete, why didn't you give us a day's warning?"

"Doggone it, I didn't know it was going to work. And besides, the old man gave this thing abso-top priority. Look, you just be glad we were able to figure out how to kill the field! Whatever..." He glanced over his

shoulder as he became aware of a figure behind him, and started when he saw "the old man" standing there.

"Mr. Waverly — what is this? I've read the reports on it, and the fairy stories those field agents sent in, but it's just not possible! Look here," he added, beckoning them over to a workbench. "This thing looks like it was put together by random numbers — or a chimpanzee with a soldering iron."

The brown case lay open and empty at the side of the bench. Sitting front and center was an unlikely-looking agglomeration of wires and transistors, capacitors and coils, and a few other things Napoleon could not immediately identify.

"We traced some of the circuitry on this gadget," he said, "but it gives me the fidgets. It's got open ends and dead shorts all through it — and some of the components I can't even analyze, let alone figure out what they are or what they are supposed to do."

"Can you figure anything out of it?" asked Waverly.

Pete laughed bitterly. "Look. This is like showing a transistor radio to Edison. Worse. Edison knew what radio waves were — and was a heck of a lot smarter than I am. He could tell you what it did, even if he couldn't tell you how. Getting this thing started was a piece of luck — getting it stopped again was just as lucky. We connected a broken wire to start it, but disconnecting the wire again didn't stop it. Besides, the soldering guns got cold and we were working by match-light. I cut a wire — a different one — and it stopped. And that was about the third wire I cut. I know which ones I cut, and I think I could put it back together again. It might start if I did, or it might not. I think I could get it going again, and I'm pretty sure I could stop it if I did. Outside of that, I don't know anything."

"You read the reports on this — do you remember the description of a variable factor called 'Theta'? Do you think you could control it?"

The lab technician gave a snort of laughter. "If there was a knob marked 'Theta' I could twiddle it and see what happened. But all there is that I can understand is a timer. And it's gone off a long time ago."

"What are the chances of building another one?"

"For the guy that built this one, pretty good. For me? Ask a bushman to build a laser!" His voice dropped conspiratorially. "Look, I've got a top

clearance — tell me the truth. Did you really get this off a flying saucer?"

Waverly harrumphed, and his face seamed into a smile. "No. I wish we had — the Martians would probably be more willing to cooperate than the individuals who actually did built this." He sighed. "Keep working on it, and find out what you can. Obviously some of the circuitry is dummy to confuse investigation. If you need to start it up again, let me know beforehand, and I'll authorize transportation to Site Delta, so you won't upset things here again. Do everything you can to it — short of destroying it. And if you absolutely have to destroy it, check with me before you do."

The technician shook his head sadly. "I'll do what I can, but I don't know how much that'll be."

Waverly clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "It will be as much as any man in our organization could do — that's why you're here. Now do it."

Pete lit up with encouragement. Compliments from Waverly were rare. Of course, they almost inevitably accompanied his request for the impossible, as in this case. Perhaps this was one reason his workers so often accomplished the impossible.

* * *

Back upstairs, Napoleon gave voice to a speculation.

"Thrush seems to know quite a bit about what DAGGER is doing. What do you think of the idea that DAGGER might be just another front for a Thrush operation?"

Waverly exhaled a cloud of blue smoke and shook his head thoughtfully. "Seems unlikely. They lost three operatives and an aircraft trying to capture the Energy Damper. And they would be aware it is beyond our ability to duplicate — or even understand. It could do more harm here in this building than anywhere else." He steepled his fingers and stared at them as if he were trying to remember how many he had. "Besides, Thrush seems quite as concerned about DAGGER as we are. An interesting point for speculation. Thrush has definite reasons for not wanting to see the world destroyed. I wonder..."

In the following seconds Waverly did not seem inclined to say just what it was he wondered about. None of his listeners intended to speak first, though, and after a while he nodded slowly and thoughtfully to himself, and the corners of his mouth twitched a little.

At last he looked up. "It's getting late. There will be quite a bit to do tomorrow, I'm afraid. Miss Keldur, have you residential arrangements? If not, we can put you up in one of our apartments for the time being."

"Thank you," she said. "I'd appreciate that."

Napoleon rose, saying, "It's been quite a while since lunch. If you're as hungry as I am, I know a little Italian restaurant, and since it's Saturday night..." His voice faded as he accompanied her to the door.

Illya paused a moment, and looked carefully at Waverly. "If you will pardon my asking, sir, do you expect something to happen tomorrow?"

Waverly leaned as far back as his chair would allow. "Yes, Mr. Kuryakin, I *do* expect something tomorrow or Monday — something totally unexpected." He frowned. "I only wish I had some idea of the form in which to expect it."

Illya pondered this for a few seconds, and then said, "Thank you, sir. Good night." He allowed the door to slide softly closed behind him.

Section III: "Though It Rain DAGGERS With Their Points Downward."

Chapter 9: "Take Us To Your Leader."

The unexpected happened right on schedule just after lunch on Monday. Napoleon and Illya were, surprisingly enough, at their desks, taking care of paperwork that had piled up while they been away. Garnet was shopping. No one knew where Waverly was — as usual. At about fifteen minutes after one the usual quiet of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters was shattered. A cascade of flashing lights, bells, horns and sirens sounded as every alarm in the building went off at once.

Television monitors at strategic points sprang to life, showing the scene in the entrance area just behind Del Floria's shop. The receptionist had hit every button on the board, and was now standing behind the desk, her back to the camera, gun in hand. Running footsteps converged on the area as shirt-sleeved agents, bristling with armament, rushed to her aid.

Standing just inside the secret door, looking about them with mild interest and complete calm, stood four individuals — three men and a woman. All were formally, neatly dressed in black suits, and were reasonably pleasant-looking. One had just set a large briefcase gently on the floor by his feet, and all were standing patiently, hands at their sides, as the protective mechanism of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters closed around them.

All four were wearing Thrush badges. The men wore them like blazer badges on their coat pockets; the woman wore one quite a bit smaller and higher on her jacket.

They said nothing, but watched the tumult about them and waited for the alarms to run their course and eventually to be silenced.

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were not the first to arrive, and found themselves blocked by the backs of a half-circle of U.N.C.L.E. agents with automatics and sub-machine guns. The alarm bells were being

stifled throughout the building as they hurried into the entrance area, and the last one stopped as they shouldered their way to the front of the crowd.

In the silence, the tallest of the men said, "If you're quite finished..." A buzzer went off suddenly over the door leading into the tailor shop, and the receptionist did something with the intercom. A moment later it stopped.

The Thrush agents looked around carefully, and spoke again. "If you're quite finished, we would like to speak with Mr. Waverly. We are unarmed — we are not dangerous, and we are willing to submit to any examinations. The briefcase is not a weapon." He picked it up, placed it on the desk, and slowly and gently opened it.

The circle of guns bristled as their holders moved a half-step back, and the briefcase came fully open. It appeared to contain only some papers and two small reels of what looked like videotape.

The receptionist looked at them, eyes wide; looked into the briefcase, and looked back at them. Her mouth was open a few seconds before anything came out. "Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm afraid not. But under the circumstances..."

The intercom came to life, with Waverly's voice. "Mr. Erwin — Mr. Alshire — conduct our guests to Room Twelve, under maximum security. Mr. Solo — Mr. Kuryakin — report to my office at once. Everyone else, please return to your jobs. The emergency is officially ended."

"Thank you, sir," the Thrush spokesman said, looking directly into the concealed television camera. As the crowd disbursed, two U.N.C.L.E. agents came forward, sidearms at the ready, and said, "This way, please."

* * *

Napoleon and Illya slid into their seats just as the large television screen on the wall came to life. The four visitors from Thrush were sitting around half of a circle facing their screen, above which was their camera. Waverly touched a control on his desk, and the visitors looked up as he spoke.

"First, allow me to apologize for the rudeness of refusing to meet you face-to-face. But I am sure you understand the necessary precautions."

"Perfectly," said the spokesman. "An unarmed man is the most dangerous of assassins because few will guard against him. This way you will be able to listen to us without having to guard against us at the same time. And what we have to tell you and show you is of the greatest importance. If we could arrange to have these spools of videotape fed into the system..."

"Certainly. Hand them to the gentlemen outside your door."

One of the Thrushes rose, tape reels in hand, and crossed to the door, which opened automatically, revealing an armed guard. The guard accepted the tape without a word.

"Mr. Waverly, we are from the Public Relations branch of Thrush. We have data which will be of interest to you, regarding the problem of the organization known as 'DAGGER'."

Napoleon leaned forward intently. Illya nodded quietly to himself as if he had expected it all along. Waverly spoke guardedly. "We are aware of the problem of DAGGER."

"A short time ago," said the Thrush spokesman, "DAGGER came to the attention of a Satrap on the West Coast. With some difficulty, a high-level member of this organization was brought in for interrogation, to satisfy ourselves as to the nature, goals, and affiliations of DAGGER.

"The tape you are about to see is our record of that interrogation. Down the right side of the frame you will see the simultaneous polygraph recording of the subject's reactions. In the lower left corner is a meter which indicates the amount of electric current being fed through the arms of the chair. Across the bottom of the frame will appear identification of other techniques used in the interrogation. We have mimeographed copies of the transcript available for you."

An orange light flashed on Waverly's panel, and he spoke. "The tape is ready. Do you want it played now?"

"Yes, please."

He touched another button, and the image of their visitors tore up and was replaced by a field of jagged lines which shortly resolved into a scene familiar to both Napoleon and Illya.

The camera was looking down on the subject, fastened into a metal chair in the middle of a small metal cell. His body was erect, and his mouth was firmly set. A voice said, "What is your name?...What city is this?...Where are you from?" There were pauses between the questions, but the man gave no sign of having heard them. The traces on the polygraph record were unsteady.

"What are the goals of DAGGER?" The lines down the side jumped badly, with the respiration trace recovering first, heart second. Skin conductivity was drifting toward the edge of the scale until a light at the top of the frame flashed "CALIBRATE." Then it centered up, continued to drift, and finally settled into a new position.

"Where is the headquarters of DAGGER located?" The heart was beating faster and the breathing was shallower. Skin conductivity rose steadily. The man was becoming increasingly terrified, but was obviously not going to volunteer any information. The voice said, "No more questions." The man relaxed.

A moment later the word "HYPNAMINE" appeared across the bottom of the frame, and the picture tore up. When it re-formed, the voice said, "Gas administered ten minutes ago. Subject in medium trance."

The man was slumped forward in the chair. His breathing was deep and irregular, his heartbeat slow, skin conductivity low. The voice spoke again, soft and insistent. "I am your friend. I wish only to help you. But you must help me. Tell me the names of your other friends in DAGGER."

The man in the chair raised his head a little and looked glassily toward the TV monitor below the camera. In the upper left-hand corner of the frame suddenly appeared a slowly-turning spiral, drawing the eye to its center. The man stared fixedly at his screen, where the hypnotic vortex was presumably full-sized. He made a vague sound, like an attempt at speech.

"Tell me the names of your other friends in DAGGER."

"Misstraut allen, in welchen der tribe zu strafen mächtig ist."

There was a moment's silence while the interrogator considered this; then he said, *"Geben sie mir die Namen ihrer anderen Freunde im DOLCH."*

The subject stared into the depths of the spiral and said, without intonation, *"Jeder kleinst schritt auf der Erde is ehedem mit geistigen und körperlichen Martern erstritten worden."*

"Wo befindet sich der Hauptsitz der Vereinigung?"

The man continued to speak in German, while Napoleon tried to remember why the phrases sounded familiar. Then he had it — they were quotations from the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher who had preached the conquest of mankind by the superior man. It seemed appropriate, considering what they knew of DAGGER.

There was a pause before the interrogator spoke again, and this time there was a slight edge to his soothing voice. *"Welche seien die Ziele ihrer Vereinigung?"*

The subject's face had not changed expression, nor had the polygraph traces revealed any sign of nervous reaction. Nothing moved but his mouth, as he continued to give voice to the quotations.

After a moment the figures "G-12" appeared at the bottom of the screen, and a few seconds later pulse and respiration dropped and the man's head sank forward as his voice trailed off. The picture tore up again as a voice said, "Subject has now regained consciousness."

When the image steadied, the man was looking around nervously. The voice spoke again. "You apparently will not cooperate without a little prodding. Let us know when you have decided to talk."

The dial in the lower left-hand corner of the frame stirred a little off zero and rose perhaps a tenth of the scale. But the effect was totally unexpected. The pulse and respiration shot up and skin conductivity went off-scale in a moment. The man struggled against the clamps in panic, and gasped. "No! The leader is Keldur — Kim Kel..." His voice caught and choked.

The polygraph record showed a deep breath gasped in and held as the heart spasmed violently twice, and lapsed into slight irregular twitchings. The electric current was cut off at once, but the heart contracted again as the man in the chair made an awful sound and strained against the clamps.

The respiration trace showed one last shuddering exhalation as the heart stopped. The man slumped loosely in the chair, like a puppet with its

strings cut. Skin conductivity began to fall slowly. Blood pressure fell. Pulse and respiration were two perfectly straight lines. After a while the picture cut off and the screen went dark.

Napoleon Solo glanced across the table. Illya was studying the backs of his hands intently. Napoleon reached for a carafe of water, and poured himself a glass. His mouth and throat seemed uncommonly dry. They had seen men die before, but watching a machine reading out every bodily function, automatically recording every detail of his last moments, was not pleasant.

Then Waverly touched a button and the four representatives from Thrush were on the television monitor again.

As soon as the screen lit up, the spokesman said, "I don't believe I made clear to you the scale on that voltmeter. The amount it registered just before the subject's heart attack was quite small — it would have been moderately painful, but by no means fatal except in cases of a diseased heart or some other physical weakness. This man's heart was strong and regular until the pain was applied.

"I might also point out to you that even while under deep drug hypnosis he was able to resist our suggestions. The German he spoke turned out to be quotations, apparently at random, from various works of Nietzsche — so deeply implanted that they dominated even his subconscious.

"An organization that can indoctrinate its members this effectively is not an ordinary organization. And if our reports on the nature of their main weapons are not exaggerated, they present a threat greater than any the world has ever faced."

Waverly said, "They are not exaggerated. Every word of them is true."

The Thrush nodded. "Apparently the man panicked when he realized we were going to begin applying pain stimuli. He blurted out the name of Kim Keldur at the last moment, but the stimulus was applied anyway." He paused. "The interrogator was too quick. He has been disciplined.

"The name was checked out. Kim Keldur was found in our records — as a member of the San Francisco nest of Thrush. He was also listed as deceased, about a year ago. Discounting this, his files were examined. Keldur was — or *is* — a brilliant theoretical mathematician, specializing in

the physical sciences. He could not have risen above the rank of technician, however, because of a dangerous psychological instability revealed by the extensive tests our applicants undergo. He could have been a danger to the organization, as intelligent as he was — his philosophy was too much at odds with our own. He believed..." (the Thrush consulted his notes briefly) "...he believed that mankind was fundamentally evil, base, worthless, and deserving only of destruction." He stopped, and looked up at the camera.

"It was our conclusion that Kim Keldur was: a) the head of an organization called DAGGER; b) the inventor of some kind of weapon of unsurpassed destructive potential; c) capable of employing that weapon to any ends, not short of total destruction of the human race. Certain evidences he left behind when he disappeared and was believed dead indicated the direction of his last researches. He was working on the nature of energy transference — the way magnetic energy becomes motion, for instance, or nuclear energy becomes heat and light. This, coupled with his psychological predilections, left us with only one conclusion.

"It was in anticipation of our course of action that all our...less socially acceptable activities on the West Coast were discontinued, and all our efforts have been bent toward locating Keldur — and DAGGER. When Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin suddenly appeared in Los Angeles, we apparently overestimated your intelligence service and concluded they, too, were interested in locating and stopping Kim Keldur."

He paused, and smiled a wry little smile. "We would like very much to know how Mr. Solo managed to locate Kim Keldur and learn of his planned attack on Boulder Dam within twenty-four hours after landing in Los Angeles — especially since our evidence indicates strongly that he arrived with no knowledge of the existence of DAGGER."

Napoleon cleared his throat self-consciously. "Well," he said modestly, "I live a clean life."

"And you have helpful friends," Illya murmured.

"This is all very well researched," said Waverly, with a hint of impatience in his voice, "but what is your purpose in telling us things we already know?"

"Mr. Waverly, the idea of the destruction of the world has Thrush worried in much the same way it has U.N.C.L.E. worried. The objective of Thrush, as you know, is to rule the world — so obviously we do not want the world destroyed, especially since we would perforce go with it. We must therefore do all we can to save the world from Kim Keldur's threat.

"Thrush is well-organized, but it is not really such a large organization. We have many freedoms that you do not, but you have massive power. We have technical developments and weapons beyond yours, but you have the strength of public opinion. You have endless restrictions, but we have enemies all about us. You have been unable to do anything about Kim Keldur and DAGGER. So have we. Mr. Waverly, in view of the circumstances, Thrush offers an alliance with U.N.C.L.E. for the duration of the common threat."

There was absolute silence in the office. Waverly stared at the screen, and very slowly removed the pipe from his mouth. Without looking he set it down very softly on the table.

After a moment the Thrush spokesman added, "There are many arrangements that must be made for mutual security. We will leave a number of our key personnel as hostages for any agents working with us; Thrush extralegal activities in the affected areas will cease for the duration; and so on."

At last Waverly managed to speak. "If you don't mind, we will cut out of the circuit for a few minutes. This will take quite a bit of study." He blanked the screen and turned to face Napoleon and Illya.

Illya spoke first. "Do you really think they can be trusted?"

"Of course not — but they can be relied upon. Thrush will do anything that is most practical, most efficient, most direct. The question is, how far are they willing to go under these circumstances?"

"If they are so efficient and practical, perhaps they are correct in their appraisal of the threat of DAGGER. All our evidence — and I see no reason to doubt the evidence they showed us — indicates their analysis of the situation to be reasonably accurate."

"And since we blunted their point at Boulder Dam," Napoleon added, "DAGGER seems to have gone so far underground we couldn't find them

without a mining engineer. Thrush doesn't have the personnel for heavy-duty routine footwork like this is going to be."

"Yes," said Illya. "And U.N.C.L.E. doesn't have the contacts to know where to dig."

Waverly nodded, and tapped absently at the bowl of his pipe. "Since Keldur was trained by Thrush, they would also be better able to predict his behavior. They also have access to information we lack."

"We *might* be able to work with them under certain conditions," said Illya, "protecting our backs at all times and watching out for doublecrosses. I think we can believe they have no desire to be destroyed along with the rest of the world."

Waverly reached for his tobacco jar, and there was silence as he carefully filled his pipe, tamped it with a moistened thumb, and set it afire. At last he said, "Is there anything else?"

There wasn't. He touched the button that put them back in communication with their visitors.

"We are willing to discuss terms for this temporary alliance you suggest. There are however, a great many aspects of security which must be handled carefully."

The Thrush spokesman smiled. "Here you have more to gain than we do — since we already know most of the inner workings of U.N.C.L.E., and you will no doubt be able to learn more about the secrets of Thrush."

Waverly cleared his throat. "In point of fact, we have little to learn about Thrush. We know almost everything about you — including exactly how much you know about us — and how much of it is true. But our focus of interest should be on finding out more about DAGGER," he added with mild reproof.

"The interrogation you just witnessed, combined with our knowledge of Keldur's psychology, indicates most strongly that this is not a group of rational individuals," said the Thrush leader, his inflection implying that this in itself was sufficient reason for their destruction. "DAGGER, we have every reason to believe, is made up of fanatics — people who are incapable of logical reasoning." He hesitated. "We have not yet been able to determine the cause behind such a large number of fanatically dedicated individuals

clustering together. Nor have we been able to make an estimate as to the actual number. But our data indicates a minimum of one hundred."

"You have shown us something we didn't know," said Waverly. "Allow us to return the favor. Only the innermost circle of DAGGER is aware of their actual goal. Other parts of the organization know only as much of the total as is necessary. As to their fanaticism, this is also related to their position in the ranks. The innermost circle is quite as fanatic as your evidence indicates."

"Fanatics are the worst enemies," said the Thrush, "and the worst friends, as well. We employ a few, for special purposes, but dislike them as a matter of policy. Any man who cannot be bought cannot be trusted. He may sell you out at a whim."

Waverly's face crumpled into a smile of disbelief. "This may seem immodest," he said, "but I have always considered myself trustworthy, and of my best agents I have heard nothing of bribery."

"Proof of our point, Mr. Waverly. A man's price is not always money, but depends on the man. Money is the most common denominator, but in fact your loyalty has *been* bought — by the ideals which the United Network Command for Law Enforcement represents. This is your price — and it is a price which Thrush cannot meet. If U.N.C.L.E. stopped working toward those ideals — if they stopped paying your price — you would take your services to any other organization that would pay the coin you can accept. You are trustworthy because you have been bought — and at a price which few could top."

Waverly nodded slowly and thoughtfully, sucking on his pipe. He smiled again. "You may be right. And may I add that most of my top agents are 'bought' for the same price — service, directed toward the control of crime. Crime of *all* kinds," he added pointedly.

He considered a moment, then suggested, "I would guess that the price Thrush pays its highest echelon is personal power?"

"That is mostly correct. We try to buy every man at his own price. Power is the highest, money the lowest. You show a quick grasp of our principles — I think we may be able to come to some kind of agreement after all."

* * *

Negotiations continued for several hours. Waverly was on the intercom part of the time, on the transoceanic telephone part of the time, and bringing consultants from other departments into his office most of the time. There were a vast number of things to arrange.

The Thrushes were to remain as hostages, but Waverly insisted on at least two high-ranking operatives of equal value to Solo and Kuryakin. Thrush agreed without reservation to cooperate with U.N.C.L.E. until the problem of Kim Keldur and DAGGER was nullified. At the insistence of Waverly, they agreed, although hesitantly, to modify their methods of operation to some extent during the period of cooperation, out of deference to the sensitivities of the governmental supporters of U.N.C.L.E. with regard to anything illegal.

Because of the greater flexibility of the Thrush organization, it was determined that Solo and Kuryakin would go to San Francisco, to work with the Nest there.

"Keldur has definitely pulled out of Los Angeles," the Thrush spokesman said. "We have been able to trace a few of his supporting connections, and everything indicates that his base is somewhere in the Bay Area. Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin have the only first-hand knowledge of DAGGER."

"Of course," said Waverly. He paused, thoughtfully. "I think," he said slowly, "we will be sending a third party."

"Fine," said the Thrush. "Separate accommodations?"

"Not necessary," said Waverly. "I plan to work in the same conditions my men do."

Chapter 10: "The Technological Hierarchy For What?"

The jet touched down in San Francisco late the following afternoon. Among the first passengers out were Napoleon Solo, Illya Kuryakin, and Alexander Waverly. To the casual eye they would not have appeared to be together. The wave of disemplaning passengers carried them through the collapsible passage from the jet directly into a waiting room, and into the corridor leading to the center of the terminal. Then, its force spent and its components spreading out, the wave deposited them near the doors at the top of the corridor.

They walked into a flare of lights, behind which large gray pieces of equipment bulked. Napoleon got a glimpse of a television camera, and then a microphone was shoved in his face and a voice said, "Welcome to San Francisco! My name's Bud Carey — what's yours?"

Squinting against the lights, Napoleon was able to make out a tall, handsomely polished man in a gray suit. He was showing a lot of teeth. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue? Heh-heh-heh!"

"Solo — Napoleon Solo."

"Well, Mr. Solo! Is this your first trip to San Francisco?"

"No — no, it isn't." He was able to see past the lights now, and Waverly's retreating figure was silhouetted against the daylight beyond the glass wall across the concourse. Illya was nowhere in sight.

"Our question for today, Mr. Solo, is, 'What do you think is the best age to be?'"

With scarcely a pause, Napoleon said, "One hundred and fifteen."

"Well, how about that! Why would you like to be a hundred and fifteen?"

"I didn't say I'd like it — I just said it would be a good age to be. If you were one hundred and fifteen, think of how long you would have lived."

The emcee didn't think of it. Instead he asked, "And how old are you, Napoleon?"

Napoleon scowled. "I'm sixty-three. And I owe my good health and continued vitality to daily applications of alcohol inside and out, a diet of

raw meat and french pastry, and half a dozen cigars every day. Now if you'll excuse me..."

As he hurried past the TV camera and lights, he heard the emcee exclaiming, "Sixty-three! It certainly is a wonderful thing, ladies and gentlemen! Heh-heh! He must be a Californian! Now here's a nice-looking young lady " At this Napoleon threw a glance over his shoulder and saw the announcer bending down to address a shriveled hag who could well have been one hundred and fifteen. He didn't wait to hear her answer.

Waverly and Illya were standing impatiently by the baggage delivery area. There was a girl in crisp whites with them, wearing a blue cape lined with red, and Napoleon regretted even more the time he had spent making a fool of himself in front of dozens of televiewers.

There was their luggage too, and Waverly turned as he approached and looked at him coolly. "Our presence in San Francisco is supposed to be somewhat less than public knowledge. Did you consider the effect your appearance could have on our Mr. Keldur?"

"Now really, Mr. Waverly, I've seen that show, and they don't exactly call for volunteers. Bud Carey just grabs whoever comes within reach. Besides, Mr. Solo doesn't look like such a publicity hound to me."

Napoleon looked down at the girl. She was small and slender, with very long, very blonde hair under her starched white cap. Her features were delicate. Her eyes were large and brilliantly blue, and looked intently into his. He found himself speechless for a moment.

Illya stepped into the breach. "Robin, this is Napoleon Solo. Despite everything you may have heard, he's really quite decent. Napoleon, Robin has been sent, appropriately enough, as a welcoming committee from Thrush."

She said, "Welcome to San Francisco, Mr. Solo," in such a way that Napoleon found himself wanting to go out and come in a few more times — and then to stay for several months. "Our car is just outside," she added, turning to Illya, "and your luggage is already loaded."

Napoleon looked around and saw that all the bags had somehow disappeared while he was being welcomed. He nodded. "Smoothly done, Robin. I'm well on my way to becoming a full-time birdwatcher."

She laughed like a wind-chime in a light breeze, and started toward the door with Waverly, beckoning Illya and Napoleon with her eyes.

Outside the door stood a big, beautiful, brilliantly polished and quietly aristocratic Rolls-Royce, vintage about 1928. It was black with unostentatious gold trim, and a chauffeur in a gray uniform sat at attention behind the wheel. Large and clear on the doors, in place of a crest, was the black-and-white insignia of a thrush — the badge of the owners.

The footman appeared and opened the door for them. All four entered the back seat area, and the footman resumed his place beside the driver. The coach seemed to be the size of a small sitting room, with a horsehair sofa along one wall, and a plush-cushioned chair against the other. Robin sat in the middle of the sofa, and Illya took the folding jump-seat. It was difficult to tell when the car started, but soon it was out of the airport and on the freeway going north toward the city.

Robin was every bit the charming hostess, even offering drinks around from a built-in cocktail cabinet. Illya watched her intently, and only occasionally did his attention wander around the car. After a time he broke the silence. "This car — is it standard Thrush equipment?"

Robin's laugh tinkled briefly. "Oh, not at all! But we find it so much more in keeping with the tradition of our city that we take extra trouble and expense for it. Actually, we seldom use it except for formal occasions — such as meeting Very Important People at the airport. The head of the San Francisco branch thinks our public image is very important."

"Public image," said Waverly, in a bemused tone. "Somehow I have never given thought to Thrush having a public image."

"But it does," said Robin definitely. "And we try to keep it a good one. At least in this Satrap. After all, what is autonomy good for if you don't do something autonomous once in a while?"

"Reasonable," said Napoleon. "But before we get into a political discussion, could you tell us where we're going at seventy miles an hour in perfect silence?"

"Oh, you're going to meet the head of San Francisco operations — the leader of this Satrap. Of course he can't meet you at headquarters — we

have to keep a *few* secrets, you know — but you will be guests in his home, practically in the heart of the city."

Illya nodded. "Hospitable, concerned with tradition — a veritable hotbed of the old-fashioned virtues."

"Oh, he is," said Robin. "He really is."

* * *

The house before which the Rolls stopped looked like it had been built out of the old-fashioned virtues solidified under pressure into bricks. It stood tall and respectable on a corner at the top of a hill overlooking the center of the city, and facing a small green-velvet park with little gnarled trees and shaded walks. The sunset glowed to their left as they faced the house, which rose three stories from the main floor some eight feet above street level, and descended one to a windowed ground floor. Rising above the roof, and the building next door, was a square tower set back half the length of the house. With its high-peaked roof, the tower added another floor and a half to the building's height. A perfect spot, Napoleon's practiced eye recognized, for long-range antennas to be concealed.

The ground floor could connect to any number of tunnels to anywhere — the small windows under the eaves on the third-floor could conceal machine guns...He shook himself and collected his thoughts. *After all,* he said to himself, *we are among* friends. *We are among* friends. *Really. All right,* he finally agreed, *but just the same...*

He looked over his shoulder, and imagined the green surface of Alamo Square peeled away, revealing a warren of Thrush operations under the hill. But that really *was* unlikely. And anyway, they were being invited inside.

He followed Waverly up the flight of stone steps to the front porch, and Robin rang. A moment later a buzzer sounded, and the door opened.

They were ushered into a cozy Victorian sitting room, gas-lit, lined with overstuffed and leather furniture, rubbed oak tables, and high, crowded bookshelves. A bay window at the far end looked out on the square.

A large, elderly Siamese cat wandered out to investigate them, and passed them reluctantly. As they entered, a man was doing something at a

bookcase. He turned to greet them.

"At the risk of repeating something you have heard before, allow me to welcome you to San Francisco." He was tall and spare, and the gas-light from the lamp on the table left the top of his balding head in shadow and cast strange highlights on his beard. The flames seemed to glimmer in his eyes as he extended a hand to each of them in turn. "Mr. Waverly — Mr. Solo — Mr. Kuryakin. Truly pleased to meet you."

There was a soft rustle of skirts at the door, and he said, "Gentlemen, my wife. Irene, you should know our guests." He gave her name the British pronunciation, with both e's long.

"Of course I recognize them, but I could hardly claim to know them, under the circumstances." She shook hands all around, and said, "Can I get you anything to drink? Did you have dinner on the plane?"

Napoleon was reluctant to accept drinks from strangers — especially here. But Waverly, without hesitation, said, "Thank you. I'm afraid we didn't. I would like a scotch and soda." Napoleon fought his instinctive caution, and took the same. Illya requested a light liqueur, and they took seats.

"Mr. Alexander Waverly," their host began formally, with a note of almost sinister satisfaction in his voice. "I have been looking forward to meeting you for longer than you could imagine. Mr. Alexander Waverly...." He smiled, and Napoleon's eyes began to scan the paneling of the walls, certain now that they had been led into a trap.

"I know practically everything about you," their host continued, his voice low. "Parents, background, education..." The Siamese crouched by the chair a moment, and leaped into his lap. His hand moved over and began scratching the furry head.

"You were a clerk in Whitehall in 1914, and when the Great War broke out you enlisted in a regiment called the Artists' Rifles. You saw action near Brest for a while, and then in 1915 you went to serve under that imbicile Sarrail at the Macedonian Front. The next year your regiment was again transferred, this time to Allenby's command in Palestine. I don't need to remind you of this — I see you remember. You were wounded severely there the day before All Hallow's Eve, in 1916, and shipped home. By the

time you recovered your health, the war was over, and you returned to Civil Service. You rose through the ranks of British Intelligence during the second act of the same Great War, and when the United Network Command was formed in 1946, you were the logical choice to head the American operation.

"My repeating your history may seem pointless to you, Mr. Waverly, but I am swiftly approaching my point. Do you remember an incident near Salonica, during the Macedonian campaign? A young lieutenant of another regiment was hit by an enemy shell which shattered his left leg. You came out of your trench under heavy fire, and dragged him to safety. Do you remember?"

Waverly looked strangely thoughtful, and spoke slowly. "Yes...yes, I do remember. The officer was taken back to a field hospital as soon as the barrage was raised. As I recall, we were hit with a surprise gas attack early the next day, and what with all the confusion we lost communication with the medical unit and I never did find out what happened to him — whether he lived, or if they saved his leg." He stopped, and thought. "The man's name was...Boston? Barton? I'm not even sure. Something like that."

Their host got up clumsily from his chair, and gripped a heavy cane. "The man's name was Baldwin. Ward Baldwin." He limped badly as he crossed to the horsehair sofa, and Waverly rose slowly to his feet. "And he has waited fifty years to thank you for saving his life."

He extended his hand to Waverly, who stood now, looking rather stunned. The two old warriors shook hands, and there was a long, long moment of silence.

Then Irene arrived with their drinks. "Supper will be a few more minutes," she announced. "Robin, can you give me a hand in the kitchen?"

The blonde nurse nodded and followed her out. Napoleon gave Baldwin a puzzled look. "Ah, excuse me. Mr. Baldwin, but...somehow this domesticity seems very much out of keeping for an important figure in Thrush."

Baldwin's eyes glittered under the yellow gaslight as he smiled with pleasure. "Why, Mr. Solo? Did you expect an underground fortress or some futuristic architectural monstrosity crouching on a hilltop? Such

melodramatic locations, I am aware, are favored by some of our branches, but life underground makes my joints stiff, and a strange building on a hilltop is far too obvious a target for my peace of mind. Were you looking for some sign of criminal conspiracy in the household or in our behavior? Any physical evidence would not be noticeable to even the most acute observer, I assure you, and if our behavior were affected by conscience or fear we would long ago have left this organization. Were you to break faith with our agreement and attempt to arrest Robin, my wife or myself at this very moment, you would not be able to find a scrap of material evidence that would indicate we are anything except what we seem — an aging cripple, his wife, and his private nurse, living on assorted pensions and dividends from old investments."

His eyes held Napoleon's a fraction of a second longer, and then turned to Waverly as the latter asked, "I suppose that, like myself, you have been working in Thrush since its inception?"

"I am flattered, Mr. Waverly, but no. The Hierarchy has been around longer than either of us. I came into contact with it while recovering from the Great War...."

"The Hierarchy?" said Napoleon and Illya together, sharing the vague feeling they had been expected to give the straight line.

"Originally The Technological Hierarchy for the Removal of Undesirables and the Subjugation of Humanity," said Baldwin. "Since reduced to its initials by a generation trained to speak and think in shorthand."

Napoleon's eyebrows went up in spite of himself. "The Technological Hierarchy for *what*?"

* * *

Baldwin patiently repeated the name, and then continued. "Shall I give you the basic orientation lecture, somewhat edited from the one-hour version? You seem to know little beyond the current state of the Hierarchy, for all your intelligence sources."

He looked them over like a schoolmaster who has found his pupils have not been following his lectures.

"In its present state the Hierarchy dates back to the year 1895, when the First Council met in London. The First Council was made up of the survivors of an unnamed organization which had been built entirely from nothing by one of the most brilliant men the world has ever known. The Professor was a genius in two slightly related fields — mathematics and crime. In 1879 he began to construct a web of power which covered all of Europe and was extending its tentacles into America by the time he was killed in 1891.

"He had made no provisions for his own sudden death. Under the constant harassment of the law and its representatives, and with its guiding mind and heart gone, his network fell apart.

"But in 1895, several men who had held high positions under the Professor met in council at the Northumberland Hotel. Out of that council was born the Technological Hierarchy for the Removal of Undesirables and the Subjugation of Humanity.

"Their policy decisions then and later created something far beyond the ambitions of the Professor. His desire had been to build a purely criminal organization, to cut for himself a piece of every large illegal operation in Europe and America, and in return to improve the efficiency and scale of these operations. He was in effect a director of some and consultant for the rest of crime.

"The First Council were aware of a few things the Professor had not seen. Crime, *per se*, does not pay as well as it used to. And money is no longer as hard to get. The true wealth, they knew, lies in personal power. They set for themselves the goal of unification of the entire world under their control, and the rebuilding of the world into the image they foresaw, with all inefficient, non-productive or anti-productive members of society eliminated, and the efficient, productive members producing at their direction.

"Electric power was relatively new at the time, radio was barely experimental, and atomic power undreamed of. But they also foresaw that their key to power would lie in science. They became the first corporation to maintain a staff under contract for pure research, and as a result at this

time we are still responsible for technical breakthroughs as much as two years or more ahead of other industries."

Baldwin stopped and looked out as his wife came to the door. She said, "When your voice gets tired, supper's on the table."

Baldwin braced his arms against the chair and levered himself into a standing position. "And thus the name. The Technological Hierarchy — for the Removal of Undesirables — and the Subjugation of Humanity."

He led the way down a picture-hung wall to a small informal dining room, where a table was laid and chairs waited. Conversation ceased then, except for such necessities as compliments to Irene and requests for salt, butter, and condiments. Napoleon began to feel more at ease with these people — until he suddenly realized it. Then he tensed up again. He shot a glance at Illya, who had ended up sitting next to Robin, and tried to read his friend's feelings. As usual, this was difficult, and Napoleon couldn't tell whether Illya was feeling uncomfortable or not.

Waverly gave the impression of complete relaxation. He and Baldwin were discussing tobacco blends and preferences in pipes, just like two old friends meeting weekly for a chess game. Solo began to feel foolish, and had to keep reminding himself that these people were all important members of Thrush — Thrush, whose workers had tried to kill him and Illya uncountable numbers of time. Thrush, whose admitted goal was the conquest of the entire world by any means that availed itself. But they seemed so *nice*....

Funny thing, he thought. *You don't* look *like a Thrush*.... He looked over at Robin, and she threw him a smile that could have set off the cartridges in his automatic. He smiled back. *They want to kill me and my friends — they want to conquer the world — well, nobody's perfect.*

He shrugged and went back to eating.

Between dinner and dessert, Baldwin began talking about his own history with Thrush — or the Hierarchy, as he invariably referred to it.

"I came to this country as soon as I could after the War ended. I was embittered against the world, and came into contact with an old superior officer of mine in New York. He recommended me for trial membership, and I donned the gray uniform first in 1921.

"Mr. Waverly, do you remember a gas called Thornite? It was a poison gas of a particularly vicious type, for the time. There was a sort of free-lance spy by the name of Kosloff who had gotten a copy of the formula and a sample of the liquid form of the gas. The Hierarchy decided to join in the rush of bidding for the information, and because of my training in chemical warfare I was assigned as an aide for the team of representatives we sent to Kosloff.

"The man was a clever spy, but a clumsy technician. The arranged demonstration was highly successful, except that the gas escaped control and Kosloff as well as most of the witnesses were killed by it. My experiences in Salonica stood me in good stead — I improvised a mask which held together long enough to enable me to secure the last few drops of the gas and escape from the island. When I brought back this story, and the sample, I was rewarded with immediate advancement. The sample was analyzed, and the gas was added to our arsenal. It has some properties which kept it in demand until fairly recently.

"The Hierarchy has never been so large there has been a lack of opportunity for advancement. As failure brings punishment, so does success bring reward. An efficient system, and one which continues to meet with pragmatic validation."

He looked around, and then said, "Gentlemen, my apologies. If I were allowed to continue, I would talk about myself and the Hierarchy all night. We do have business to discuss — business of a serious nature. I suggest we adjourn back to the sitting room for a trade of information. Irene, I think the dishes can be left for the time being. I want you to join the discussion."

When they returned to the front room, the sky outside was dark. A few stars could be seen, and the lights of the city were visible past the bulk of the park across the street. The gaslight seemed not only sufficient illumination, but quite appropriate for the setting. Baldwin filled his pipe, and handed the humidor to Waverly, who stoked his ancient briar and settled back contented.

It was Illya who spoke first. "Mr. Baldwin, I think our first serious topic of discussion should be Kim Keldur — his history, his psychology,

and his probable behavior. As his former...employer, your records should contain a wealth of data on him."

"Quite correct. Robin here takes care of such things for me in addition to her medical duties. She is a true wonder as far as paperwork is concerned." He nodded to Robin, who began to quote as though from memory.

"Kim Keldur joined Thrush in the fall of 1962, worked his way up in his Satrap rapidly and attracted the attention of Thrush Central. He underwent the full battery of tests, and passed all except the psychological. In effect, they indicated he had strong aptitudes for theoretical mathematics and for destroying the world. His lack of desire for material goods or power, and his positive distaste for mankind and all its works, were the deciding factors in his stabilization at a high local level. While an excellent field and research worker, Thrush Central found him unfit to advance to a policy-making level as his personal goals were too far divorced from those of our organization.

"In January of 1965, Keldur and two fellow agents were flying from Hawaii to San Francisco when their plane disappeared. When no traces were found, they were presumed dead and their files closed. Then, some six months ago, a series of petty crimes were reported in various locations up and down the West Coast, utilizing techniques and equipment which our Intelligence unit recognized as those with which our agents were supplied. A complete security check was made at once, and no leaks were found.

"Among the gear on the lost airplane were three complete field agent's kits. There was also a good assortment of other specialized items which had been employed on the Hawaiian trip — many of which had been there by Keldur's specific request.

"When his name was given by the captured member of DAGGER, the likelihood that he was connected with these crimes passed minimum probability, and his sister was placed under surveillance. She had been unaware of his connection with Thrush, and was therefore not alert for us. We quickly found out Keldur was alive and active. We also found he had gathered a small organization of cohorts and supporters, and was in the process of developing some horrible weapon about which nothing could be

discovered. Our field agents reported rumors which were generally disregarded as impossible regarding a field which could prevent ordinary weapons from functioning, or snuff fires, but no eyewitnesses could ever be found."

Baldwin spoke. "The interrogation of the DAGGER member was a signal failure. There is no record of anyone in our experience ever having been so thoroughly indoctrinated against revealing information. If we can take another DAGGER with any information worth digging for, we will probably take as much time and care as we would in disarming a live bomb."

"I would suggest " Illya began, but was interrupted by a shattering of glass as the front window burst inward, showering Baldwin's chair with shards and splinters. A bottle, clad in flame, hit the rug near the center of the room and exploded in droplets of fire.

"Hold your breath!" Baldwin said sharply, and did something with the arm of his chair. In the same moment that the bottle burst, spreading its flaming contents across the room, gray clouds of white smoke thundered from a number of small holes in the wall and billowed across the floor.

A few seconds later the room was freezing cold, and dark. The only light came dimly through the broken window, filtered by the peasoup fog which seemed to fill the room.

Irene was on her feet. "I'll get the air-conditioner running and clean this stuff out," she said, and was gone.

Napoleon ventured a cautious inhalation, and choked. The clouds were water vapor condensing in the bitter cold, and carbon dioxide, from some dozen or so concealed fire extinguishers inside the walls.

"The molotov cocktail," said Baldwin, in the tone of a lecturer concluding a demonstration, "is unsophisticated and old-fashioned, quite out of place in a modern, technical society. But it is quite practical, inexpensive, and extremely effective when properly used.

"My apologies, gentlemen, for the foul odors. Irene had this installed some time ago, because my pipe occasionally gets out of hand and I cannot move fast enough to escape a fire. One of the penalties of living in a wood-paneled house of the late Victorian era." There was a distant rising hum, and

the air began to feel colder. But the fog began to move out the shattered front window.

Baldwin re-lit the gas lamp and surveyed the burned patches and extinguisher stains. "Efficient, gentlemen, and we probably owe our lives to it. But it does seem to have ruined the rug...."

Chapter 11: "We May *All* Be Outnumbered!"

The shards of the bottle had been picked up and saved with the greatest of care by Illya, and the next day he accompanied Waverly to the San Francisco office of U.N.C.L.E. While Waverly was in conference with Jerry Davis, the local chief of staff, he took the black and broken pieces of glass down to the lab and found a technician to help him in his work.

Two hours later they had checked the fragments for fingerprints, ashes of fiber or hair, and subjected the charring to a mass-spectrum analyzer. The bottle itself was easily seen, from the remains of a label, to have originally contained Oak Barrel Muscatel, and this was verified by the analysis of the remaining material coating the glass.

But of fingerprints, fibers, or any other type of more specific identification of the last user, none could be found.

When Illya returned to the office level, Davis' secretary signaled him. "Mr. Solo and Mr. Waverly are here. Go right on in, please."

Inside, he found a layout similar to that in Los Angeles. Three heads turned as he entered the room, and he found himself being introduced.

"Welcome to San Francisco," said Jerry Davis, as he rose to shake hands. "I was just going over the situation with your fellow New Yorkers here, and touching on the subject of our relations with the local law enforcement people."

"Or you were about to," said Waverly.

"The point I was about to make," said Davis, resuming his seat, "is that things are somewhat different in San Francisco. Perhaps you can get away with a lot as far as New York's Finest are concerned, but the police here take a dim view of running gun battles up and down Market Street, bombs going off in public places, and bodies left on the City Hall steps at dawn." He shook his head disapprovingly. "Do you ever work in cooperation with the New York police on problems?"

Waverly frowned. "Our interests seldom overlap."

"We work with ours quite often. Perhaps the New York police are more tolerant in view of your admittedly unusual position, but the San Francisco police do not find us at all amusing."

He leaned forward. "Now, I'm not trying to tell you how your operation should be handled. But I feel you should know the situation. The police can be very helpful if you work with them, and they can also make things very awkward if you..." He shrugged. "You know."

"Do we?" Napoleon asked innocently. "You seem to be cautioning us against breaking any local ordinances. We're really not such desperate criminals as that, you know. In fact, we'll try to keep our gun battles on back streets, and we'll only shoot people who really deserve it. And more than that — we'll make every effort to inform the police of our intentions in advance."

"The problem is that our opponents may not abide by such civilized rules," Illya added. "In this battle — in all defensive battles — you must fight when and where your enemy wants to fight. It's a bad way to run a war, but it is required by convention. The sheriff must always let the bad man draw first."

Waverly leaned forward. "That's enough. Mr. Davis, let us drop the subject. Reports of our behavior in New York are somewhat exaggerated."

"Have you had any luck with the material Los Angeles sent up on DAGGER?" Napoleon asked, eager to change the subject.

"Garnet Keldur's list of contributors? We've checked out the local ones — with the help of the police — and as far as we can tell they all think they're supporting a charitable organization. About two-thirds of them think he's a harmless crackpot, just want some interesting donations to take off their income tax. The other third think he may actually have a line on some way of stopping atomic war — and most of *them* are harmless crackpots, but crackpots with money."

"He doesn't have a large following, then?"

"No idea. He could have a small army. We just haven't found any of them yet. All the funds contributed go through a lot of devious channels to get to wherever they are going." He tossed a few stapled sheets of paper on the table. "A few bits of identifiable money have turned up — here's the data."

Illya picked up the pages and leaned over to Napoleon so that they could both see them. Davis continued. "These are some stores where

donation checks were cashed. Electronics supply stores — big ones. Never the same one twice."

Waverly asked, "And have you checked out the stores, their clientele, and the cashers of these checks? Have you sent men to talk with the donors?"

"Since the list here was only completed last night, we have scarcely had time. I was thinking your men might do some of the legwork .. ." He broke off as though he had been about to end the sentence with "...for a change," and then had thought better of it at the last instant.

All right, thought Napoleon. *The glamour boys from the Head Office are being given a hard time. So we'll play along.* He looked at Illya and raised his eyebrows. Illya gave a little shrug in answer and nodded. They both looked at Waverly.

Their superior also nodded, though without a great deal of enthusiasm; he turned to Davis and said, "Of course. Do them good."

* * *

"Yeah, I remember that. Ordinarily we don't cash checks, y'know, especially that big. But it was written locally, and we called the bank to see if it was okay. And the guy was real nice. Sharp, too. Knew just what he wanted, and got it. And he needed most all of that check for the stuff, too."

"Do you remember what it was he bought?" Illya asked.

The man pursed his lips, and stared at the ceiling while he blew out a long sigh, thinking hard. "Gosh, no. Not after all this time. There was a lot of heavy-duty stuff, I remember — I asked him if he was building his own power station or a 50-kilowatt transmitter. And what was it he said? Something about...Oh, yeah. He said, 'I have a *big* hi-fi rig.' Got a kick out of that."

"Anything besides simple components? Anything that wouldn't go into a hi-fi rig?"

"No...not that I can...Wait a minute. He wanted half a dozen GX 40 B9 tubes, and we didn't have any. That's a kind of unusual tube — it's a multi-stage internal resonator with a real high inductive reactance field. Not much

call for it from our customers. I told him he might try Charmolian Electronics over in Oakland — they have a good stock of special-order items."

"And did he?"

"Gee, I wouldn't know. You would have to check with them. He probably did, though — he was pretty bugged 'cause we didn't have those tubes, and he sure wanted 'em. Here, I'll give you their address. Charmolian'd remember — something funny like that."

* * *

Meanwhile, Napoleon Solo was more pleasurably engaged. A mansion sat amid the trees in the mountains above Oakland, looking over the city to the shining sheet of water that was the Bay, and the rising mound of San Francisco far away through the haze. And out on the sun deck a girl lay basking, with plastic eye-cups protecting her vision from the beautiful view.

Napoleon crouched beside her, talking intently. It had taken a good bit of intent talking already to get this far. She didn't want visitors, and she didn't care who they were. She had never heard of U.N.C.L.E., and didn't want to. She didn't know who can Keldur was, and she never gave to charities. But at least she was now lying still again and listening. Napoleon gave silent thanks for that correspondence course in salesmanship, and kept talking.

* * *

"GX 40 B9?" The man behind the counter frowned. "I don't know anything about that. Let me get Mr. Charmolian for you. He takes care of all our special items — knows the whole stock by heart." He disappeared, and a fraction of a minute later was replaced by a man about four feet tall and four feet wide. He bounced like a rubber ball.

"What do you know about those GX 40 B9s?" he squeaked. "Are you from the police?"

"Not exactly. What would interest the police about these tubes?"

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'? Look, mister, I reported the theft to the police the day after I found out about it — and I only spent that day making sure they weren't lost. You from the insurance company?"

"No," said Illya, fishing out his identification. "I represent the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement."

"Yeah? I've heard of you. Like Interpol?"

"Somewhat. Now what about these tubes? How many were stolen, and when?"

"Four. All we had in the warehouse stock. I found they were gone about six days ago."

"How?"

"Well, we always keep a couple handy — we get a lot of business from people who need off-beat stuff right away — and a guy came in and bought both of them. Last Tuesday, it was. And the warehouse manager couldn't find the replacement stock. So the next day, I had to get over to the warehouse myself to check a big order, and I took a look for the GX 40 B9s. And they weren't there."

"You checked..."

"Mister, I check that place all over! Now, I know those tubes were there, because I brought 'em in myself, see, and if I didn't trust Pat completely I'd probably say it was him stole 'em. Pat Frieden's my warehouse manager, and he's been with me twenty-three years. But I don't know how any burglars could have gotten in there — we've got the whole place wired with the best alarms we can get. And besides, burglars would have taken more than just four tubes. I mean, they're valuable tubes, but where could they sell 'em? Nobody could have any use for 'em."

"What about the man who bought the two you had here?"

"But he *got* his two. What would he need any more for?"

"Did he only ask for two?"

"Yeah. I handled the sale myself — the boys leave the special items to me. I keep the whole stock inventory right here," he said proudly, tapping his forehead. "The guy said, 'You got any GX 40 B9 tubes?' and I said, 'We

sure do, mister. Got a couple right back here.' And he said, 'Fine. That's just how many I need' and took 'em."

Illya nodded.

* * *

Napoleon was still talking to the girl. She lay facing the declining sun within her glass-walled deck. Her butler occasionally came out with an iced pitcher of something to keep her glass filled. Napoleon had not been invited to join her, but at least she was speaking to him now.

"Really, Mr. Solo, the world is quite a large place. I should think it would be impossible to build something that would do...*this*...to all of it at once."

"A hundred years ago, it would have been impossible to build something that would carry a voice to every point on the globe. But the big radio stations can do it. And this man is onto something at least a hundred years ahead of present-day science, and on a different track. Believe me, I have had this machine very effectively demonstrated."

Her head turned slightly, and a slim golden hand came up to lift the plastic eye-protectors. Her cool gray eyes looked straight at him for the first time. She smiled. "Mmmm. You are much handsomer than I would have guessed from your voice," she said. "You may sit closer to me, and continue telling me...whatever you were telling me. Do you mind if I interrupt with a question once in a while?"

"Not at all," said Napoleon politely. "It'll show you're still listening."

She laughed as though she practiced it in private, and tapped her fingernail against her glass. "Godfrey, another glass."

She stretched like a cat, her arms over her head, fingers curling, body twisting a little. When the glass was placed before Napoleon a moment later, she said, "It's beginning to get cool, Godfrey. What you turn on the infra-reds as you go in?"

Godfrey gave a little bow of acknowledgment, and did something on the doorframe as he went back inside.

"Now," said the girl, "tell me all about this nasty machine."

* * *

"In here is where the GX 40 B9s were stored, Mr. Kuryakin. See the locks? Best ones we could buy. I guess Mr. Charmolian told you about the way we're set up."

Illya knelt by the doorframe and examined the area around the lock closely. There were no visible marks of any kind.

After a few moments, his guide said hesitantly, "Uh, Mr. Kuryakin, it's getting to be my quitting time. If you'll be much longer, I can tell the night watchman you're here and to let you out when you're through."

Distracted, Illya glanced up. "Yes, thank you, Mr. Friedan. I may be some time yet. I would like to examine the area where the tubes were stolen, and check over the detectors of your alarm system."

"I guess that'll be okay. I'll tell him when I go out. Just stop by the office on your way out and tell him you're leaving so he can secure after you."

Illya nodded and went back to his work.

An hour or so later, it had become fairly clear that if the tubes had been removed by someone from outside, it could have been done only by an expert with the best Thrush equipment, and probably a small Energy Damper to stifle the alarms. And they had been inconsiderate enough to leave no footprints, monogrammed handkerchiefs, matchbooks, or other standard clues behind them. The only sign of their passage was the absence of four uncommon electronic tubes.

He suddenly realized it was dark, and looked at his watch. The only light came from shielded bulbs spaced twenty feet apart in the dim distance of the ceiling. He was sitting on a packing case under one of the pickups for the alarm system, which he had just finished examining. It was chilly, and very quiet.

And softly, far back in the distance, there was the scrape of a footstep.

Illya didn't move, but every sense was suddenly extended to its fullest awareness. Without lifting his head, he shot his eyes around the part of the warehouse he could see. The shadows of the crates sat like puddles of ink around leaking bottles. There was no movement in his range of vision, so

slowly and casually he leaned back against the case behind him. After a moment he yawned elaborately, and got to his feet. As he stretched, his hand slipped to his transceiver and palmed it.

Shifting his weight and looking around the edges of the ceiling as if for a leak, he crossed his arms and brought the hand holding the transceiver to his mouth. He thumbed the transmitter button, and the little device vibrated softly. He knew Napoleon was somewhere in the area, and would feel slighted if he weren't invited to the brawl, especially since it looked as though it might be a good one.

With the microphone touching his lips, he murmured his identification and a request for Agent Solo.

* * *

"But Napoleon, it still doesn't sound possible. It sounds like some insane gimmick from a horror movie."

"Believe me, Gloria, it is real. I know. And anything you could tell us about Keldur could possibly help."

She sighed and turned to refill her glass. They were inside the living room now, as the evening had grown chill, and she had put some more clothes on. "On the other hand, you *are* a government agent. And you *could* really want to suppress the device."

"U.N.C.L.E. is not a government agency of any kind. We are supported by most of the major governments of the world, but we are not responsible to any single government. Believe me, if we can stop Keldur from using his machine to destroy the human race, our own technicians will make every possible effort to use it to *save* the human race."

She sat down and shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just don't dare risk it. I can tell you nothing."

A quiet whistling note filtered out through Napoleon's jacket, and he pulled out his transceiver.

"Solo...Of course. Where?...How many of them are there? Okay. I'll be there in ten minutes. Play hard-to-get."

Gloria looked at him questioningly as he rose.

"I'm sorry too," he said. "There's an emergency. My partner is in trouble, and he thought I might like to join him."

"Trouble?"

"Yes. He's under attack by about a dozen gentlemen who appear to be working in the interests of DAGGER — and Kim Keldur."

She sat there staring at the closed door for a full minute after the car motor roared and the wheels spat gravel and Napoleon Solo took off into the night.

* * *

Illya crouched behind a packing case carefully selected for difficulty of access to and ease of escape from. His assailants were no longer trying to keep quiet, and had even gone so far as to snap off a shot or two at him before he had sought cover.

He was in contact with Napoleon, and had kept him informed of the conditions as they became apparent. When he arrived, he would be fully aware of the entire situation and be able to function within it. Theoretically.

The DAGGERs had done nothing for a minute or two, and Illya was beginning to wonder whether they had given up and gone home. Napoleon should be outside about this time, and he might meet them leaving. Illya opened his transceiver again.

"Napoleon — be careful when you come in. They're so quiet I can't be sure what they..."

Phud! Something burst a few feet from Illya and a white cloud of vapor spread out around it. "Never mind. I just found out. They're using gas. Get in here quick." The sentence used up the last of Illya's breath, but before he inhaled again, he was able to fish a small plastic case out of his pocket. His chest was beginning to ache as he opened it and pulled out two little rubber devices that looked a little like ear-plugs.

It is much harder to hold breath out than to hold it in — he just had time to fit the plugs into his nostrils before taking a deep breath. He took it slowly, because the filters passed air slowly. It would be impossible to take

any violent exercise with them in, but it would have been just as difficult after a few deep inhalations without them.

It seemed a shame to disappoint them, Illya thought, so he fell over anyway, pulling a crate down with him. He made quite a satisfying clatter, and added to it with a few well-chosen gasps and groans before becoming still.

And in the next few seconds, while the attention of every attacker out there in the near-darkness was focused on Illya, Napoleon Solo came silently through the back door. Looking quickly around, he spotted a steel ladder in deep shadow, leading up to a gridded catwalk around the whole room some thirty feet above the floor, from which he would be able to command the entire area of the warehouse. As he slipped up the ladder, the scene below him took on a new dimension.

Silent figures were moving among the packing cases, converging cautiously on a spot where a broken crate lay beside a still form. Napoleon could see only part of the focus of interest — a leg and part of an arm were visible. That was enough.

Illya, you've done it again, Napoleon thought, and, bracing his automatic on the railing, drew a bead on the back of one of the moving figures.

The faint rustle of cloth sliding against skin warned him a fraction of a second before the blow fell. He jerked to the side, and a heavy wrench smashed against the railing inches from his hand. A sound like a leaden gong rolled through the room, and the moving figures disappeared as Napoleon spun around, the gun ready to fire.

A foot burst out of the darkness and caught his wrist, sending the pistol spinning away into space. With his left hand he grabbed for the foot, caught it and pulled.

His attacker fell heavily, and Napoleon leaped upon him, landing painfully on the metal catwalk as the other rolled quickly aside and leaped to his feet. Napoleon swung a leg, and swept the other's feet from under him. Then they were in a clench, rolling against the concrete wall and then toward the edge.

A pair of hands fumbled for Napoleon's windpipe. He grabbed for a wrist, and wrenched it hard. The other hand caught his tie and slammed his head against the railing. Lights flickered momentarily before his eyes and he brought his knee up hard, feeling something soft give before it. There was a whoosh of breath.

His attacker didn't slow down more than a moment. A head caught Napoleon under the chin, and he tasted blood. He caught a flailing elbow in both hands, and bent it the wrong way. There was a muffled sound like a nut being cracked, and the other man gasped in agony and fell away. He made weak, pain-filled sounds as Napoleon quickly searched him. A security badge pinned to his shirt identified him as "Pat Frieden, wrhse mgr," and, by implication, fink for DAGGER. He was unarmed.

As he stood up, Napoleon became aware of the noises on the floor below. Something slapped against the wall a few feet from his head, and something like a hot spark stung his cheek for a moment. At the same instant, he heard the thunder of a heavy automatic pistol echo through the room. He hit the catwalk again, and made his way on his belly to the spot where the ladder ran down to the floor.

He peered over the edge, and saw a flash of fire from Illya's location. Apparently his fellow-agent had most of the baddies pinned down, but one of them somewhere was dedicated to keeping Napoleon out of the battle until Illya's ammunition ran out.

A desperate situation, Napoleon decided, calling for desperate measures. He got out his transceiver, and set it to a local frequency.

"Hello, Illya! If you can hear me, fire two shots at your friends down there."

A pause, and then *Blap! Blap!* came two silenced shots.

"Okay. I'm up on the catwalk. I'll work my way around till I'm directly over you, and then I'll lay a couple of tear-gas eggs. If you can spare a minute, get your filters on. When the eggs hatch, be ready to take off to your left — to your *left* — over two crates there and straight for the door. Hit anything that comes out that isn't me. If you got all this, fire two shots in the direction you're going to jump."

Blap! Blap! Two spurts of flame went off toward Napoleon's right, Illya's left.

Cautiously, Napoleon began working his way along the catwalk. It was a gridwork, rather than a solid plate, and his figure would be clearly visible from beneath. He could see only one crouching figure under the catwalk between him and his goal.

Staring into the darkness, Napoleon finally spotted a gleam of metal. There was the wrench Frieden had come after him with. *He* would be no help to anyone for quite a while, but his wrench could come in handy — Napoleon tucked it in his belt and started quietly along the catwalk.

He moved without a sound, but there was a light glow above the walk directly over the spot where one of the enemy crouched, casting a cross-hatched shadow down the whole height of the wall. The passage of that spot would be the hardest part.

Napoleon moved cautiously to the very edge of the cone of light, and then slipped the wrench from his belt. Looking carefully across the floor, he saw no one looking in his direction. He rose to his knees and leaned far out, holding onto the railing with one hand, and flipped the wrench.

It caught the unsuspecting lurker squarely in the back of the head. He slumped forward and lost all interest in the proceedings. The thump and clatter of the wrench were loud in the stillness, and then there was another shot from Illya and a couple of answering shots from concealed attackers. Before the echoes of the thunder died away, Napoleon was off and sprinting across the light. He passed, as nearly as he could tell, unnoticed.

The two tear-gas bombs he had ready really were about as big as eggs. They contained no explosive other than their own internal pressures, released by impact, to spread their contents over a large area.

In a moment of afterthought, Napoleon got out his nose-filters and slipped them in. He hoped Illya had had time to get his own on. He should have — the firing was sporadic now.

The eggs arced down, and a few seconds later the floor of the warehouse was a blanket of smoke. Illya burst out of the fog and headed for the door, followed blindly by a number of choking, weeping men.

Napoleon sprinted along the catwalk back to the ladder, and dropped down it, hardly touching the rungs. As his feet hit the floor he was jumping for the door by which he had come in.

Illya dashed around the corner and leaped into the car as the engine roared into life, and the little car took off with a squeal just as three figures appeared at the edge of the building and began letting off shots after them.

"They appear sorry to see us leave," said Illya.

"I can tell," said Napoleon, "they're are all broken up about it. Incidentally, remind me to go back there after the air clears and pick up my pistol. I hope it can be repaired after that fall. "

"I didn't want to bring this up, Napoleon, but there appear to be three or four cars following us. It would seem a fairly large force of DAGGERs has come out to welcome us."

"You must really have stepped on some toes. What all did you find out?"

"Nothing, really," said Illya casually as the car suddenly whipped into a 90-degree turn and shot off down a side-street. "I sort of looked around and got a few ideas. It looks as if one of them may have been correct." He popped open the glove compartment and produced another automatic as Napoleon tapped the brakes and twisted the wheel, and with hardly a bit of momentum lost they spun and headed up an alley.

It turned in the middle, and he had to brake sharply to make the corner. Half a block ahead, a car was parked crosswise, blocking the alley.

Illya spoke again. "I hate to be the first one to suggest this, but I think we're outnumbered. Would you rather die heroically or call for help?"

Napoleon had his transceiver out.

"Agents Solo and Kuryakin, requesting assistance."

A voice answered almost at once, requesting situation evaluation and location. Napoleon gave them.

"Thank you," said the voice. "We will have a flying squad there in five minutes."

"A flying squad?" said Napoleon blankly.

Then something shattered the windshield, and shards of glass burst into the front seat between him. They flung open their respective doors and dived out.

There was one single streetlamp high overhead, right where the alley turned. It cast the shadow of their car ahead of them, and picked out several moving figures, ducking behind garbage cans, rubbish bins and the one telephone pole. There appeared to be about a dozen of them.

A moment later Illya appeared beside Napoleon. "I just checked around the corner," he said. "There's another team moving up the other end of the alley."

Napoleon shrugged. "You drew yourself an assignment," he said. "You stop yours, and I'll stop mine."

"And if you don't?"

"We'll think of something." He half-rose from his concealed position and snapped off a shot at something moving. When he ducked down again, Illya was gone.

Two quick shots from behind him meant his partner was on-post, and his rear would be as well-protected as any one man could accomplish. He turned his full attention down the alley.

Something lobbed through the air, and Napoleon buried his head in his arms and clutched at the ground. There was a dull explosion, and the car was suddenly wrapped in flames. Under the rising cloud of smoke, Napoleon saw a number of pairs of legs running toward him, zig-zagging as they came.

He began shooting at them, slowly and carefully. Two men went down, and his garbage can was hit three times by others. Then a gas-masked figure loomed out of the smoke and Napoleon fired point-blank at him, feeling a mild surprise when nothing happened as his gun jammed. Without wasting a moment trying to fire, he leaped sideways as the masked man's gun roared flame. He snatched up the garbage can and slung it at waist level.

It caught the other man across the stomach and the gun hand and bowled him over. Napoleon was in the air by the time he hit the ground, and landed with both knees on the other's rib-cage. He caught the swinging gun neatly across his shoulder and felt pain lance down his arm. He swung his

own gun backhanded across the other man's face, tearing off the gas-mask and laying him out unconscious.

The car was burning merrily now, and Napoleon felt glad for the sealing gas-tank that was standard equipment on all U.N.C.L.E. cars. An explosion in this confined space could be quite uncomfortable.

On the other hand, the burning car now effectively blocked the alley from the end he was guarding. He picked up the .38 Special he had been attacked with, tucked his own malfunctioning weapon back in its holster, and looked cautiously around the corner.

Illya was standing behind a telephone pole a few yards down the alley. Napoleon called to him.

"Can you use any help? I got my half."

Illya glanced over his shoulder. "Thank you, no. I'm well matched. They are very bad shots."

All the same, Napoleon experimentally drew a careful bead and ricocheted a slug off the brick wall approximately into the midst of the hiding figures. There was no reaction, so he shrugged and pulled back. *Never was that good at cushion shots,* he thought.

A sudden roaring sound like a low-flying jet went off behind him then, and he spun, dropping into a crouch with his gun at ready. Then he saw a white cloud of vapor swelling up through the flames of the burning car. A moment later the flames shrank and began to vanish. Through the clouds Napoleon could see several figures in black suits and gas masks. Heaving a tired sigh, he raised the gun.

"Don't shoot," came a muffled voice. "We're your rescue party."

Then he could see on every breast pocket a white patch with the black emblem of Thrush. He sat down on the pavement and leaned back against the brick wall as a fusillade of shots sounded from around the corner. Of course — the other half of the rescue party.

This just wasn't right! Not only had he and Illya blundered into a trap, they had been forced to call for help to get out of it. And to top off the complete humiliation, they had been rescued by Thrush. They must have been monitoring the frequency complex of U.N.C.L.E.'s transceivers, and

had answered his call. That was why the voice had promised "a flying squad."

The shots from around the corner stopped, and the sounds of voices came, followed a few seconds later by Illya, surrounded by a troop of heavily-armed Thrushes. His head was down and his shoulders didn't quite have the usual set. Napoleon got slowly to his feet as the rest of the rescue party vaulted over the smoking remains of the car.

The leader stuck out his hand, while peeling back his mask with the other. "Mr. Solo? I'm John Whiting, your friendly neighborhood Thrush rescue party leader. Any casualties on our side?"

Napoleon shook his head slowly. Not only rescued, but automatically included on "our side." He wondered momentarily whether he had really wanted that badly to be rescued.... "No...not as far as I know. Illya?"

"No, I'm unhurt."

"Good. Who is this customer?" asked John, prodding the prone figure with his toe.

"No idea, at the moment," said Napoleon. "This is your party — do you want to take him home and see if he'll eat?"

"That's what Old Baldy asked for," said John with a grin. He whistled, and two more Thrushes hurried up. "Hustle this meat into the car," he said. "There's been too much noise. The police may come by any day now, and we don't want Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin embarrassed any more than they are already."

Chapter 12: "Let's Take Him Sightseeing."

"Of course you understand my position, Mr. Baldwin. Under the circumstances I cannot tell you anything at all about my associates."

"I understand perfectly, Mr. Horne. You are not the first representative of DAGGER we have interrogated, and we are aware of the rather remarkable precautions your leader has taken to ensure against your informing on him. But you should also appreciate our position. While it is true that we would gain nothing by your death — save a fleeting satisfaction at a job well done — it is also true that we need information, and we need it quickly.

"As far as we could tell, the more subtle forms of investigation, such as sensory deprivation, slow starvation, or the traditional water torture, would probably induce you to impart your information to us willingly — but we lack the time for such methods." Baldwin frowned, leaned back in his red leather chair, and began to disappear in a cloud of blue pipe smoke. After a while he spoke again. "If anyone has any ideas, bring them up."

Napoleon and Illya, a couple of pieces of sticking plaster in evidence, were sitting in on the problematical interrogation of the leader of the band which had attacked them. Robin was nowhere in evidence, which darkened the room a little; she had disappeared after patching up the two U.N.C.L.E. agents and reviving their uncooperative trophy. Waverly was in the wicker armchair across the drum table from Baldwin's chair. Irene sat primly in a narrow straightback, and the two successful hunters shared the horsehair sofa. No one had gotten anywhere.

Irene spoke. "Peter — what part of the country are you from?"

"Cincinnati," he said doubtfully.

"I thought I detected a touch of Ohio in your speech," she said in a friendly tone. "How long have you been in San Francisco?"

He looked at her suspiciously, considering the question. "Oh, a few weeks," he said. "Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered," she said innocently. "I suppose the rest of the group still considers you a newcomer? Now, they wouldn't have given you the job of heading up this important assassination if you didn't have an edge

on the rest of them. This means..." She broke off, and abruptly changed the subject. "We've had awfully nice weather for November, don't you think? Just a little sprinkle now and then, but that keeps the air clean. How have you liked it?"

He smiled almost unwillingly. "Well, I haven't seen much of it either. We, uh...we're pretty busy, of course."

Irene nodded. "I imagine so. How do you like San Francisco? Or have you seen it?"

"Not enough to tell. We drove from the airport and right across the bridge, and except for a couple of quick business trips I haven't seen the city itself at all."

Irene sat her glass down firmly. "Ward, part of this young man's trouble is cultural deprivation! I say we've had enough of this formal routine interrogation — let's take him sightseeing."

"Now really, Irene. After all, he is our prisoner. He might try to escape, and that would be bad for our reputations as hosts."

"Oh, we can handcuff him to something."

Baldwin sighed. "All right, my dear." Then he brightened. "And we can kill four birds with one stone, if our guests will pardon the expression, by conducting our famous fifty-cent tour of the city. I shall ring for the car...No, it's after midnight, and Bruno objects to being awakened. Irene, would you like to drive?"

"Certainly. Besides, even the Rolls would be a bit crowded with all six of us in the back, and Bruno hates to have passengers in the front seat."

Waverly cleared his throat. "Mr. Baldwin, if you don't mind, it's rather late for me, and I know this city well. I should like to go to bed early for a change, and your tour may take all night."

"Of course. We would like to have you along, but if you really know San Francisco well, you can learn little. Do you know, for instance, the history of a little side-street that bears your name? Waverly Place was the site of the most terrible tong wars in..."

Irene interrupted what threatened to become a lengthy discourse, saying, "Gentlemen, your warm coats are in the hall closet. I suggest we

start our tour right away."

* * *

The prisoner seemed unsure whether or not to enjoy his tour of the city. He listened suspiciously to Baldwin's narrative, as they rolled past the Jack Tar Hotel.

"On our right is the Crackerjack Tar, the greatest mistake ever built north of Los Angeles. In fact, it is rumored that the rectangular blue construction is actually the box Disneyland came in. One major reason I maintain my position as head of the San Francisco branch of the Hierarchy is so that, when we do take over, I can have the personal pleasure of razing that abomination to the ground."

Personally, Napoleon rather liked the glittering futuristic façade of the hotel, but decided it was more polite to hold his opinion to himself.

They passed through the old Barbary Coast area, where Baldwin pointed with relish to the remarkable frescoes and bas-reliefs on the building fronts, and went on past Colt Tower; then a slow drive down Stockton took them through the back-street of Chinatown. Baldwin said, "This is the face of Chinatown most tourists miss. Even at one-thirty there is life stirring. The barred door there opens into Shanghai Rosie's — to the best of my knowledge the last opium den functioning in the traditional manner in the Western Hemisphere. San Francisco generally takes pride in maintaining its links with the past."

A couple more turns brought them up in front of a large two-story building set slightly into a hill. Irene stopped the car, and they all got out. "Here is the nerve center of San Francisco's most famous moving landmark," said Baldwin, as they approached some large windows set close to the ground. Geraniums filled their window boxes.

Inside, under suspended light bulbs, great flywheels spun amid muted thunder, carrying a cat's-cradle of heavy cables around themselves over sheaves of pulleys fifteen feet in diameter and fifty feet apart. There was a smell of grease, and of power.

Baldwin looked at it lovingly. "This is the cable house," he said. "Here the miles of cable that run under the streets of the city return endlessly and

go out again. They are tremendously strong, these cables. Day in and day out they bear thousands of pounds of cable cars and passengers up and down the steepest hills, and hardly ever break. They run all day and all night, at a steady nine-point-five miles per hour. The only way to stop one is to shut off the power here. If the grip of a car locks on, and the power is not cut off in time, the grip will be torn out of the car at the end of the line when the cable runs down around the pulley for the return trip. There are tales of runaway cars, but the locked grid is about the worst that ever really happens." He sighed. "There are only three cables left in the city. I only hope we can take over before the forces of progress destroy them too...." They stood in reverent silence for another minute, then got back in the car.

As they started up again, Baldwin said casually, "Have you ridden a cable yet, Mr. Horne?"

Their prisoner frowned. "No, as a matter of fact I haven't."

Baldwin shook his head. "That seems as shame. Irene..."

"Yes, dear, I heard. We're en route now."

* * *

It was just after two in the morning as they pulled to the curb at California and Van Ness. There were no other cars in sight, and there was a faint whispering rattling sound filling the dark street from somewhere.

"That is the cable, clattering along in its slot," said Baldwin, as they got out of the car. "Mr. Horne, it would be a great pity for you to leave San Francisco without ever having ridden a cable."

Napoleon was idly fiddling with the links of chain he had produced from somewhere, and Illya had a small padlock. They moved toward Horne from opposite sides as Baldwin continued to talk.

"Unfortunately, at this late hour there are no cars running on this line. But this should not be a bar to our ingenuity."

Napoleon flipped the end of the chain around Warren's handcuff chain, and Illya secured it with the padlock. The other end of the chain was a long loop, with some eight feet between it and the handcuffs. Baldwin gave a crisp nod to Napoleon, who ceremonially dropped the loop into the cable

slot. He fished about with it for a moment, as Baldwin had instructed him, before it caught, and took off.

"I suggest you follow it," Baldwin said, as Horne's jaw dropped. "It's not likely to wait for you." And then Horne was dog-trotting down the street away from them at a steady nine-point-five miles per hour. They got back into the Rolls and started after him.

Within the first block they were driving slowly along beside him, and Baldwin continued, "The other end of the cable is about a mile and a half away, at Market Street. There are a number of hills between here and there — they aren't *impossibly* steep, but we hope you don't tire easily. Incidentally, I would take care not to stumble. Otherwise you would be dragged at a steady nine-point-five miles per hour all the way, up a hill *and* down.

"If, on your way to Market, you should decide to unburden yourself to us on the subject of DAGGER, the padlock could be opened in a moment. If, on the other hand, you should decide not to, you will eventually, shall we say, reach the end of the line. At California and Market, the cable runs down around a pulley for the return journey, and you would be drawn, by the handcuffs, through this inch-wide cable slot at a steady nine-point-five miles per hour. You have something like ten minutes to contemplate your choices. I hope you can think clearly while running."

Irene let her husband's comments sink in while another block passed, and the street began to rise. Then she said thoughtfully, "I don't think he'd be pulled all the way through, dear. After all, flesh and bone can only stand so much. I think his hands would just be torn off." She considered this a moment, and added, "Of course the result would be the same, since he would bleed to death in a minute or two."

Baldwin shook his head. "It depends on whether the end of his *ulna* is small enough to pass through the slot. If it were too large it could shatter and the hand be torn off. But if it fits through, his shoulders would be crushed and his rib cage would follow."

Napoleon felt rather queasy, and glanced at Illya. The dour Russian agent looked somewhat paler than usual, but that could have been the effect of the streetlights. Then he looked at Horne, trotting grimly along beside the

car like a fighter doing road-work. It seemed to be having an effect on him too. Not surprising, all things considered....

The hill rose more steeply for a block or two, and Horne began to breathe heavily. Baldwin and Irene continued their pathological discussion as casually as a man and wife having a mild disagreement about what kind of cat food to buy. The hill crested off for a short way, and Napoleon hopped out of the moving car.

He trotted along with Horne for a while, chatting with him, occasionally running backwards facing him. "There's another hill coming up — it's steeper than that last one. But you look in good condition. You can probably make it without stumbling. After that there's only about a mile to go, and most of that's downhill. Pretty steep downhill. That'll be tricky. I'm looking forward to seeing how you can handle it."

He patted Horne on the shoulder and almost caused him to lose his balance, apologized profusely, and hopped back into the car.

Conversation lagged after a while, and at one point the Rolls had to stop and wait for a red light while Horne pounded off into the distance. Napoleon called after him, "Don't wait for us — we'll catch up after a little while."

They let him go on alone for another three blocks, past the crest of the hill and starting down the steeper east slope, before they caught up with him. And then the silent motor of the Rolls enabled them to cruise along behind him for another block before Baldwin coughed loudly and Horne's head jerked around partway. Again he almost stumbled.

There were tall buildings around them now, and the only sounds were the clattering of the cable under the street, the whisper of the Rolls' motor, and the heavy pounding of Horne's feet and his labored breathing.

Napoleon tapped Illya on the shoulder and said, "It's your turn to get out and encourage him."

Illya nodded and jumped lightly out the opposite side of the car. He stopped to let it pass him, then ran around and caught up with Horne. "Hello there," he said. "Just came out to see if you're comfortable. Oh, by the way, you've only got about half a mile to go. See that little thing in the middle of

the street? Right next to that. It's fairly level from here on. Do you think you can make it all the way to the end? Do you really want to?"

Horne was apparently in no mood for conversation, so after a while Illya gave up and got back in the car. "He's in a foul temper," he said glumly.

Baldwin leaned forward. "We're almost there, dear. Would you care to make a little wager on the results?"

Irene looked doubtful. "We'll have to set more specific terms. For instance, if his arms were torn off, I think I should win, but if only his legs are left on the street, you would win. Shall we set the chest as the dividing line?"

"Difficult to judge. He may be torn apart rather badly. Let us be more specific and say the heart. Is that acceptable?"

"I think so. How much farther is it now?"

"Only a few blocks. We just crossed Sansome."

"Dear...I don't want to disappoint you, but would you mind if I stop the car a block or two away? This is going to be terribly messy, and Bruno objects to cleaning the car oftener than once a week. I mean, you *know* how far those arteries can spurt. Especially since his heart is pounding so hard now."

"That's quite all right. But didn't you have your heart set on seeing it through? I could certainly get along without it myself."

"Well, if you don't mind...Boys," she said to Napoleon and Illya, "we're going to pull over in another block or so. Would you object to going the last little way with him on foot?"

They crossed Front Street, and the Rolls pulled to one side and stopped. Napoleon and Illya got out quickly and hurried up the street. The three sets of footsteps echoed weirdly between the buildings as they came across Davis Street together. There were few streetlights, and the sky was overcast, so the gray stone fronts seemed to rise up and disappear into the darkness without ending, like impressionistic tombstones.

Illya sprinted on ahead, then stopped and turned. "Here is the place," he called, an odd edge to his voice. "You're almost there."

Horne, gasping and disheveled, kept coming. He looked up to see Illya with glazed eyes. He was thirty yards away, then twenty, then fifteen. Then he cracked. "No — No!" he gasped. "For God's sake — let me loose! I'll tell you — anything you want to know! Let me go! Quick! Quick!"

Napoleon was already beside him, key in hand. He worked the padlock and the chains slipped free. He caught one end of it and pulled the loop free of the cable. Illya whistled shrilly, and the Rolls pulled away from the curb and started toward them as Horne sagged to the street and lay there, gasping and shaking.

"Help him in, please," said Baldwin. "Irene, drive back to California and Van Ness. He may decide not to talk after all, and the cable does run all night."

"Of course, dear. It will be nice to know all about DAGGER, but I still wonder what would have happened..."

Meanwhile, Illya and Napoleon were firing questions at Horne, who lay sobbing with relief in a corner of the back seat. They learned the names of his associates, the systems through which he received his orders, the story of how they had robbed the warehouse with the aid of the manager, a convert of Keldur's; they learned everything except the location of the DAGGER headquarters and the Energy Damper, which Horne had not seen but had heard about. He wasn't too clear what it did, but it would make the world a better place — this much he knew.

"Well, it would certainly solve the overpopulation problem," Napoleon admitted.

Section IV: "The Hand That Held The DAGGER."

Chapter 13: "I Have A Special Tour In Mind."

"How many Energy Damper units does Kim Keldur presently employ?" Baldwin asked.

"None. There were only three, and right now all his time and attention are going into making the Big One."

"Three?"

"Yeah. The first working model was taken to New York and used on Solo's car by Garnet. That was big and heavy. Then they made a miniaturized version with more power — and non-directional — and left that at Boulder Dam. And Chernik wired up a test circuit which had all the properties of the Big One except power."

Irene leaned back slightly and asked, "Dear, do you want to look at the address he gave us, or shall we go home?"

"Oh, look at it by all means," said Baldwin. "They may have missed him by now, and Keldur should know better than to underestimate our inventiveness in securing information. I only hope we're in time."

He turned to Napoleon and Illya. "Keldur will probably not be using the Energy Damper as a weapon, offensive or defensive. But he has all the resources of the field agent's kits, plus a number of special order items. And there are, according to this gentleman, on the order of seventy-five to one hundred people in this area under the direct or indirect orders of DAGGER. Most of them know as little about the actual organization as will allow them to fulfill their duties."

"Whatever he told you," Napoleon suggested, "subtract about fifteen from it. We've had a very busy evening."

Baldwin produced a large gold watch from his vest pocket and consulted it. "At this hour it may take a while to call up support. But time is definitely of the essence. Irene..."

"Yes, dear. We are on the route to South San Francisco now."

"Thank you. Mr. Solo — Mr. Kuryakin — it *is* quite late, but would you care to investigate?"

"I wouldn't miss it!"

"Yes, we owe them a visit."

"How long will it take to arrange support?"

"It is being arranged for. It may be as much as half an hour, allowing for travel time," said Illya, ostentatiously replacing the transceiver no one had seen him bring out.

"Good. Irene..."

"Yes, dear. ETA about seven minutes."

"Thank you."

* * *

The location was a small electronics store on Grand, a few blocks off the freeway. Horne had been put to sleep peacefully with an injection of something Baldwin had taken out of the cocktail cabinet, and was left snoring gently in the back seat.

Irene cruised slowly past the address, and pulled into the alley behind it.

The store was dark and silent as they got out and approached the back door. Baldwin stepped forward, murmuring, "Allow me..."

He bent over the door, leaning his cane against the wall, and the shadow of his body hid his actions from them. But some fifteen seconds later the door swung open silently.

He straightened, and picked up his cane. "It was necessary to detach one of our protective devices. Mr. Keldur is foolishly attempting to use against us equipment developed by the Hierarchy, perhaps still unaware that we're now working against him. But I fear we will find little. The birds appear to have flown." He stepped aside, and gestured. "My own agility is somewhat impaired. Will you precede me?"

Napoleon's gun nestled lightly in his hand as he stuck his head around the corner of the doorframe. The room was in total darkness. A thin beam from Illya's pencil flash flitted around the room, showing workbenches, racks, shelves and cabinets, all empty. The drawers were open, the cabinet doors swung wide. The door into the front of the shop stood slightly ajar, and Baldwin examined the hinges, top, and bottom carefully before opening it.

Irene's large five-cell flash shone around.

The counter had been cleared, and the shelves were as empty of stock as the back room.

Illya broke the silence. "I think we're late." He reached for the switch near the door, and Baldwin spoke.

"Mr. Kuryakin — the light switch may be wired to a bomb. I think the flashlights are quite sufficient under the circumstances."

Illya's hand dropped, and his lips tightened a little. He scanned his light along a workbench. It was charred in little lines as though by soldering irons carelessly laid down, and little shiny flecks of metal caught the light and squinted back. A long shadow appeared in the beam, and Napoleon reached for the little shielded capacitor that cast it.

Irene started to say something, but Baldwin cleared his throat and spoke with a voice of infinite patience.

"Mr. Solo — if you're going to continue toying with things, I fear we must leave you alone, and quickly. Please try to understand that the shop has quite probably been very well booby-trapped. They would not have cleared out so completely if they had not been expecting us — and they would certainly have left something for us to find. We can do no more here; in the morning I will send a few technicians out to check the entire site over carefully. And in case you are interested, that is not a condenser, but a pressure-sensitive bomb of sufficient power to destroy your hand and necessitate amputation of most of your arm."

Napoleon drew his hand back as smoothly and casually as he had extended it. He turned politely to face his host, and said, "I bow to your superior knowledge." He bowed slightly, and started for the door.

Illya paused a moment. "Mr. Baldwin, what is the likelihood that they would have left somethingshall we say, a little more personal?"

"Not unlikely at all. If we are allowed to leave here quietly, I shall be most thankful and moderately surprised. How soon will the support from your people arrive?"

Illya glanced at his watch, and canted his head doubtfully. "Perhaps another ten minutes."

Napoleon stepped outside, and something slapped into the doorframe. He stepped back inside. "You can save both the thanks and the surprise. Either I've just been shot at again, or you have .38 caliber mosquitoes coming up from the salt flats."

Baldwin frowned, and looked at his wife. "My apologies, dear. I had not expected you to become quite so involved with this field problem."

Irene smiled. "Ward, you know perfectly well I've missed the excitement of field work since our last promotion. I wouldn't have missed this for the world." She opened her purse. "See? I even brought along my derringer."

The small handgun she produced hardly qualified as a lady's weapon — its twin barrels looked large enough to accept a thumb, and both Napoleon and Illya recognized it as the largest punch per cubic inch available to the general public — a .357 magnum derringer.

Illya cleared his throat and looked doubtfully at Napoleon, who shrugged. Very few people could handle that much weapon, and none of them in his experience had been women. He looked at the slivers where the bullet had torn through the doorframe, and wished for his own U.N.C.L.E. Special, lying on a warehouse floor in Oakland, miles away across the bay. Maybe tomorrow he could retrieve it. Until then he would have to make do with the spare he had saved from the burned car. This had not been what one would call a successful day.

It had been along one, though. The time was approaching four-thirty. *It's a good thing I'm superhuman*, Napoleon thought, as he checked the clip in the automatic. *Otherwise I'd probably be getting pretty tired of all this by now.* He looked at Illya.

His partner was on hands and knees, next to the door, peering around it carefully. He brought his automatic up to eye-level, squeezed off a shot, and ducked back. Irene said, "Excuse me, but do you gentlemen have any form of gas masks? Nostril filters or similar devices? We're likely to be under attack with our own gases as well." Her voice seemed muffled, and Napoleon looked around.

She and her husband were wearing small affairs something like anti-silicosis masks. Napoleon sighed, and got out his nose filters again.

Illya announced, "They're hiding out there, keeping a very sharp watch on the door. The fact they haven't attacked would indicate all they want to do is keep us pinned down for a while."

"They probably want to relieve us of our guest," suggested Napoleon. "Would we mind?"

"Yes," said Baldwin. "There are doubtless many things he has not told us, and I should still like to send him over the Powell-Hyde cable. It has a few interesting additions.... Irene, do you have an idea?"

Mrs. Baldwin was rummaging about in her purse by the light from Illya's pencil flash. She looked up and smiled. "I think so, dear. I've found my long comb, but I'm looking for a piece of tissue paper. It's an old trick, but they often work best against these moderns."

Napoleon stared at her, and sighed deeply. "Well I suppose music hath charms to soothe the savage et cetera, but is it really ofpractical application right now?"

Irene glanced up from her search and favored him with the patient smile he had come to know and hate. "I don't indulge in musical entertainments, Mr. Solo; I simply have what Ward likes to call an unorthodox mind for weaponry. Perhaps if I told you I also needed my mirror and my eyebrow pencil you would understand?"

Napoleon wouldn't, but he knew better than to say so. If he did, she might tell him. And he wasn't sure he was quite ready to know.

Illya stood close to the door, occasionally leaning a bit toward it in an attempt to see something outside without materially increasing his chances of absorbing a bullet. He couldn't.

Meanwhile Irene was busy working on a facial tissue with the eyebrow pencil. The top was roughly darkened, then two large round circles were drawn and carefully shaded. A long oval patch was added, and she held it up to admire her workmanship. She turned to her husband.

"Will it pass, dear?"

Baldwin looked at it a few seconds, and a diabolical smile of satisfaction spread across his features. "Irene, you are a credit to the firm. Write yourself a pay voucher for brilliant improvisation under fire." He looked benignly at the U.N.C.L.E. agents. "You see, the Hierarchy is not as dependent on complex technology as you might think. Simple ingenuity is always valuable."

Irene had hung the tissue paper to the very end of her long comb, so the face hung down, pale in the darkness. She held out the mirror to Illya. The Russian looked at it with knitted brows and intense concentration. Then gradually his eyes brightened, and he smiled his wry little smile and accepted it.

He and Irene went to the door, where Illya knelt down and, holding the handle in his fingertips, extended the mirror almost to the edge of the frame. Irene stood over him, and put the end of the comb out. Then Napoleon understood.

From ten feet or more away down the alley, in the dim light of a distant streetlamp, there would be a face peering anxiously out from the edge of the door. If they didn't spot Illya's mirror, he could see from the muzzle flashes where the snipers were located. The most efficient flash-shield in the world can't protect from straight ahead — only seldom does it to the witness any good.

There was a shot, and the tissue fluttered. Illya muttered something. "Can't see. I'll have to get closer to the mirror." As he edged forward another shot shredded the edge of the tissue, and Illya snorted. "There he is. Behind a trash bin about fifty feet down to the left."

"Do you see any more?"

"No...Yes. Two just broke and sprinted across the alley about ten yards away. They're coming closer."

A third shot tore through the tissue paper, leaving a fairly neat hole. Napoleon hoped it wouldn't seem odd to the sniper that his target didn't fall.

I think there are only the three of them," Illya said. He put his left hand out with the U.N.C.L.E. Special, and rested the butt on the ground just around the corner of the door. Still holding the mirror in his right hand, he sighted carefully and fired. There was a sound like a flat Chinese gong, and an answering shot from the sniper.

Suddenly the tissue paper was gone, and Irene pulled her hand back. She looked at the stump of her comb, and said something entirely unladylike. "My best tortoise-shell rat-tail! Mr. Kuryakin, give me that mirror."

Illya handed her the mirror, and moved away.

Talking the mirror under one arm, Irene broke the action of her derringer and checked the ammunition. Then she closed it and flexed her fingers. "I suggest you hold your ears," she said coolly, and put the mirror around the corner of the door. There was a shot from their sniper, and something slapped a shower of splinters out of the frame just above the mirror. "Thank you," said Irene politely, and extended the gun. Napoleon placed his palms flat over his ears, and felt his spine go tense.

The detonation was like a thunderclap. He felt the concussion all over the side of his body toward the door, and his ears ached despite their protection.

He lowered his hands and looked around. Irene was kneading her right hand with her left. The mirror lay on the floor. The gun was nowhere in sight. "I think I got him," she said. "Illya, take a look. Mr. Solo, see if you can find my toy."

Illya looked carefully around the corner of the door. Under the streetlight, the trash bin lay on its side, some fifteen feet farther away than it had been. Looking carefully, he could see an arm and a leg sticking out from under the edge. They weren't moving.

He pulled his head back. "Yes. You did get him."

"Can you see the other two?"

"No, I'm afraid not. They may...No, there they are. On the other side of the car." Dropping to his belly, he fired along the surface of the alley at the ankles visible under the high-slung body of the Rolls. The bullet screamed off the pavement and both sets of legs pulled up out of sight. So did Illya.

"I think they're into your car. Can they start it?"

"No," said Irene. "They'll have to be satisfied with Mr. Horne." She shook her head sadly. "It seems a shame for him to leave so soon — we should have taken him out to *Sutro's* and Golden Gate Park before ending the tour. But it *was* rather late, and we did have business to transact with him. Perhaps we may persuade him to come around again...."

Something arced over the top of the car and burst with a pop just outside the door. In a moment dense dark smoke filled the alley. "You see," said Irene through her mask. "What did I tell you?"

"I think it's just a screen laid down so they can get Horne out without our getting a clear shot," said Napoleon. "I'm going outside. Here's your derringer." He tossed it to Irene and ducked out into the smoke.

Then he was blind. He could breathe, slowly, but his eyes burned and he wanted to gasp. Squinting against the stuff, he felt his way forward until his outstretched hands hit the side of the car. He groped along it until he found the front door handle, and wrenched it open.

The smoke followed him inside the car, but he could breathe more normally, and he could see out the opposite window. The figures already several yards away were carrying a limp figure between them and hurrying down the alley. They were passing under the streetlight by the overturned trash bin when Napoleon saw them, and one turned to look. He almost dropped the feet he was carrying, and turned away quickly. Napoleon wondered what he had seen.

He opened the window, cupped his hands, and called. "Okay, you two. Put him down and your hands up."

Startled, the two men dodged sideways into a narrow space between two buildings, and Napoleon sent a shot whining down the alley past it to ensure they would keep their heads in. Then he leaned out of the car into the thinning smoke on the other side. "Illya, they're cornered. Come on and we'll rout them out."

From somewhere a slug snapped past his head and he ducked back. A back-up man they'd missed! He hoped the Rolls was armored. Those DAGGERs had thought of everything.

From the direction of the shot, Napoleon guessed him to be at the other end of the alley, away from the light, but the echoes among the walls were confusing and contradictory. He rose cautiously and peered through the back window. There was no sign of the gunman.

This was getting more annoying. Now there was nothing to do but wait for the rescue group from U.N.C.L.E. to...

A fusillade of shots broke out from the far end of the alley, and a moment later a tall man came hurrying toward them, making no attempt to cover himself. "Solo — Kuryakin — you all right?"

"Next time announce yourself," Napoleon called. "You're right on time, but I wish we'd known when to expect you," he added as the U.N.C.L.E. agent came up to the car.

Baldwin stood in the doorway, an irritated look on his face, and something small and metallic in his hand. With a slight shock Napoleon recognized the capacitor-bomb from the workbench.

"Mr. Solo, you could have saved me an awkward job disarming this thing. It is now in a condition where it will have to be treated with special care. I had intended to throw it to the second-string sniper and damage him severely enough we could overpower him without assistance from your fellows."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Napoleon with a slight edge to his voice. "If I'd known they were coming, I'd have arranged for you to meet them."

He turned quickly to ask the next approaching U.N.C.L.E. agents about the condition of his attacker, ignoring whatever reply Baldwin might choose to make.

Illya and Irene came out to the Rolls and made ready to leave. As Illya got into the back seat, he patted Napoleon on the shoulder. "That's all right, Napoleon. We love you anyway."

He looked at the Russian agent without any expression at all. At last he shook his head. "I think I'll just give up the whole dirty business," he said

cheerfully. "I'll turn in my gun, change my name, retire to a village on Minorca, and breed wombats. I just can't keep up with things anymore. In one day I have had to be rescued twice; I have lost one gun and one car; I have been insulted an average of twice an hour by our host. My heart is just no longer in my work."

Illya shook his head sympathetically. "Napoleon, perhaps you need a long vacation, as Mr. Waverly would say. Why not go home, sleep for six hours, and then report back for work?"

* * *

Dawn filled the eastern sky as they returned to their base on Fulton Street, and it was full day outside when they finally went to sleep behind drawn curtains. Field crews had taken over the routine jobs of identifying the bodies left in alley in Oakland and South San Francisco, disarming the electronics store and checking it for any possible clues.

Illya's first action on returning, even before seeking his bed, was to check his directional receiver. As was his habit, he had planted a tiny transmitter on Mr. Horne, so subtly that not even Napoleon had noticed. And the transmitter was still signaling the location of their late guest.

Sometime past noon, when they met for breakfast, Waverly announced, "It's a good thing someone got some sleep last night. Mr. Kuryakin, your little tracer has been rather busy in the last few hours. It apparently remained stationary until about ten o'clock, but since then he has awakened and begun quite a round of activities. His present whereabouts are being monitored by our equipment at headquarters, and his routes are being charted. I presume you will want the honor of running him down again?"

"Yes; thank you, sir."

By two-thirty, they were back in the Rolls and following, with Irene at the wheel again. Baldwin had opted to remain home and discuss the situation with Waverly, so Illya and Napoleon shared the front seat of the big black Thrush car.

The last report on the tracer had shown it crossing the Bay Bridge into Oakland. It had stopped downtown, and was still there, as near as any

instrument could tell.

They were on the bridge before Illya's portable detector registered the signal. He listened carefully and nodded. "There he is. Moving north."

He lost the signal briefly as they passed through Yerba Buena Island, and fiddled with the knobs as they came out the other side. "There seems to be some interference from the upper deck of the bridge," he said. "The signal is spotty. No, there it is." Suddenly he snorted. "He's coming right toward us! He must be westbound on the top level. Irene, how hard will be to turn immediately when we come off the end?"

"Illegal, but not difficult if you hold on tight. Will you fix the ticket if we're stopped?"

"Under the circumstances I think Mr. Waverly will allow it."

"All right, then. How far away is he now?"

Illya shook his head. "Hard to tell with all this steel between us. But he's getting closer."

Irene accelerated, and Illya focused his attention on the receiver. "Here he comes," he said at last, slowly, and then — "There he goes! He just went over us. Time check."

Napoleon looked at his watch and fixed the time in his memory. "Was he going any unusual speed?"

"About the limit, I think."

"Then we'll have his location pegged."

Two minutes later they came off the end of the bridge and out onto a long sweeping access ramp which swung them gently down toward land again. Irene hugged the left side, and slowed. Then a small U-turn curve opened in the low concrete divider. She cut the wheel hard, and the Rolls rocked as she touched the brake and throttle. Then they were back on an access ramp leading them to the upper deck and back to San Francisco.

"Time?"

"He's about four miles ahead of us. What does your gadget say?"

Illya listened, and frowned. He made an adjustment and listened again. "Very little. There is still unusual interference of some kind."

They sped on up the bridge and toward the island. After a minute or two Illya spoke again. "You did say four miles, didn't you?"

"Right. Why?"

"He may have been, but he's getting closer again."

"Oh, no! You don't suppose..." Irene began.

"He couldn't have seen us. And..." Illya paused. "Hm. He's not approaching very fast.... But he *is* below us." Then, just as they approached the face of the island, Illya said, "We just passed over him."

Irene looked sideways at him. "The way you said that, he didn't pass under us."

"I'm afraid he didn't. He's stationary, about two hundred feet below. In other words, he's on the bottom of the bay beneath the bridge."

"More likely just the tracer is," said Napoleon. "A body would be too obvious. But they could have flipped the pin out the window without even slowing down."

Illya said something rude. "That will tie up one channel for a month, until the battery runs down. I begin to understand your feelings of frustration, Napoleon. This entire affair seems to have become jinxed since we arrived in San Francisco."

"Please don't blame it on our city," Irene said. "You may not be used to working within the relatively open framework which the Hierarchy allows. Freedom does not come naturally, despite what your theorists would have you believe. Besides, while *our* subjects may have escaped our surveillance, we have by no means lost *them* — or vice versa. A little red car made the same highly unconventional U-turn we did at the east end of the bridge, and is presently about fifty yards behind us."

They knew better than to turn and look, but Napoleon shifted in his seat to take advantage of the side mirror. After a moment he smiled. "How considerate! But how do we induce them to let us reverse our positions so we can follow them back to their headquarters? That is, considering they *are* from DAGGER, and not from some other secret criminal organization dedicated to destroying the world — or just to destroying us."

"Napoleon," said Irene severely, "don't babble. Our first problem will be to lose them. It shouldn't be difficult."

By this time they were coming down the long slant toward the city. The tops of buildings loomed up on either side of them as they swung right to an escape ramp.

Irene continued happily, "Their car is smaller, faster, more maneuverable and less conspicuous than ours, but we have an advantage which outweighs this all. They are relative strangers to the city; I know it intimately. Pay attention, now — I have a special tour in mind which will prove educational as well as entertaining."

She swung left onto Mission Street and accelerated — and in two minutes Napoleon was hopelessly lost. Irene beat out stop-lights with fractions of a second to spare, made improbable turns, dodged up and down hills, into and out of alleys; ducked into cul-de-sacs and hid around corners. Once in a while he would recognize something like a corner of Chinatown going by, and occasionally Colt Tower would appear on a distant hill behind a building, but it never seemed to be in the same place. Whenever they crossed an open street, there would be a bridge far away down the hill at the end of it. And sometimes the street behind them would be clear, but never for very long. There was usually a little red car in it somewhere.

One long sweep through Golden Gate Park lost their tail entirely, but within three minutes after they came out on Nineteenth Avenue the little red car appeared around a corner three blocks away.

Irene did impossible things up and down Twin Peaks and north toward Corona Heights, and Napoleon's stomach did not recover until they were rolling smoothly up Divisadero alone. Irene was about to turn right on Fulton and go home, when Illya said, "Don't turn if you don't want them to know where were going. They just pulled out of Fell and are behind us again."

"Fell?" said Irene. "Then they couldn't have been following us. They were waiting for us. And I burned all that gasoline and rubber being a wild goose without even being chased!"

They continued up Divisadero at a leisurely pace. The hill became steep up, and then suddenly even steeper down, but Irene down-shifted like

a truck driver and kept the red car a neat two blocks behind. Then they came into a broad divided street running through a business district and she turned right. Obeying all the traffic laws, she let the red car get closer.

A hill rose at the end of the street, and a few blocks away from the foot of it she began to pick up a little speed. "Illya, you may appreciate the fact that we will dispose of our little following on Russian Hill."

"I do. How?"

"Watch."

The hill did not seem especially steep from the bottom, but it rose exponentially. It narrowed to four lanes, then to two as it made the final precipitous climb to the top. Irene came over it at forty, and the red car was still three blocks behind.

"Now," she said, "hold onto something."

She slapped the car into low, and the transmission howled like a trodden cat as they nosed over the crest into what looked at first glance like a colorful rock-garden. But there was a street after all — a narrow brick single-lane winding like a path among the flowers.

Irene swung the wheel to the left, hard to the right, hard to the left, back and forth, with the tires squealing protest on the bricks, weaving through the maze of switchbacks until Napoleon felt quite dizzy. They were just past half way down when he heard a dull *whump* behind them. He looked back but could see nothing over the flowerbeds.

Before they came off the bottom there were two more banging crashes from up the hill. Irene made a short right on Leavenworth and pulled to the curb. The sounds continued, coming down the hill and getting louder.

Whump! Pause. *Cranch!* Pause. *Blangk!* Pause. *Wunk!* And the red car came off the bottom of the hill at about fifteen miles per hour. It wove madly as it crossed the street and missed the next hill down. It swerved drunkenly to the left at the last moment and came to rest at an angle, one wheel resting against a fire-hydrant in front of an apartment house.

Napoleon and Illya piled out of the Rolls and sprinted across the street as the two men climbed dizzily out of the car. The car itself was a sight to sadden a body-shop. Every fender was dented, both headlights shattered;

great pieces of paint were missing from the sides, and the front bumper would need a complete replacement.

They surrounded the two shaken DAGGER agents, who were unable to put up more than token resistance, and hustled them into the Rolls, where Irene produced two sets of handcuffs from a door-pocket and clipped them to unobtrusive ringbolts in the back seat.

Meanwhile Napoleon had discovered a small buzzing box in the glove compartment of the red car. Holding it up, he announced to Illya, "I think we have the secret of their luck. *We're* carrying a tracer!"

"Unfair of them," Illya said, and continued looking around in the front seat.

Napoleon carried the box back to the Rolls, and began going over the body with it. In short order he had located a small black case about the size of a matchbox, clipped under the running board with a powerful magnet. He turned off the receiver, then called over to Illya, "Keep looking. I'll be back in a few minutes."

A wry grin decorated his face, he started up the long flight of steps that ran up the side of the street, back to the top of the hill. It was a long climb, and his legs were tiring when he reached the top, but the pleasure of doing something to the enemy for change could not be dampened. He stood at the top of Russian Hill almost five minutes before he saw what he wanted — a cable car climbing up the hill toward him from the waterfront.

He stood like a passenger near where it would stop, and the car squealed to a halt in front of him a minute later. He leaned forward with a mildly frustrated look while his left hand slipped under the high framework and left the tracer. He said to the grip man, "Sorry. I'm expecting someone."

"That's okay," said the grip, and battered his bell as he caught hold of the cable and rumbled away, carrying the DAGGER tracer on its way by a devious route downtown — and eventually back — and a steady nine-point-five miles per hour.

Back of the bottom of the hill, Illya had a few things in sealed envelopes carefully labeled.

"What have you been doing while I was out taking some healthful exercise?"

"Why you were playing around with the toy trains, Napoleon, I was collecting some genuine clues. And that little car had quite a collection." Illya indicated the envelopes. "Some metal dust from the floor of the back seat. It looks like aluminum. Here are a few pieces of a fabric I couldn't identify. And here is something quite hopeful." He held the last envelope up. It bulged.

"Rain is the best ally of the detective ever invented. I have here some bits of hard mud, wedge-shaped, as though they had been between the heel and sole of a shoe. They are dry, but unbroken, which means they wouldn't have been kicked around the floor very long. There has been no rain on the peninsula for a week, but it rained across the bay just three days ago. Perhaps a competent geologist would be able to give us a definite location."

Irene spoke up then. "In case you're interested, I checked the registration on the car. Its home is in Berkeley, and its owner is the tall one with the sullen expression. By the way, they were becoming abusive, so I sealed the back seat and pumped in some knockout gas. They'll be quiet while we take them back to our place."

"Fine," Illya said. "Now let's get back to somewhere I can get an analysis run on these. Can you drop me off at the U.N.C.L.E. office?"

"Certainly. But can you spare some of that mud for Ward? I'm sure he'd love to see it, and he might be able to tell something about its origin."

Illya nodded and handed her an envelope. "There were wedges from both shoes," he said. "This is the more complete one. Now," he said, fitting himself into the front seat next to Napoleon, "let's go."

They went.

Chapter 14: "Such A Sloppy-Looking Thing To End The World With."

Supper was on the table when Napoleon came in. He hung his topcoat on a rack in the hall and joined the rest of the group. Robin was with them again, and rather to his surprise so was Garnet.

Waverly looked up. "Ah, Napoleon. Report?"

"Nothing much. The address in Berkeley was a dead end. An apartment; he'd been living there about five months. I was unable to get into his rooms, but we can pick up a warrant and examine them tomorrow if necessary. I think, however, that we're getting close to the finish of this problem."

"Why?"

"Oh, call it a hunch. Perhaps inspired by the grenade that was pegged at me as I left the apartment house.... It was tossed from a speeding car, late model, dark blue. I didn't get the license. Speeding cars are fine for protection and a quick get away, but they're rotten for accuracy. The bomb hit a telephone pole and went off in the street. Fortunately it wasn't a fragmentation type."

Waverly nodded. "Your hunch would appear to be correct. Miss Keldur here has brought us another piece of information of great value, which dovetails with data supplied by Illya and Mrs. Baldwin earlier today. It seems not unlikely that we may be involved in a permanent sheathing of this DAGGER tonight. But here comes your salad — Illya, fill him in while he eats."

Napoleon attacked the tossed greens with an appetite, while Illya began. "The mud I found is not from the peninsula, but is as I suspected from somewhere in Alameda County."

"Specifically, from one of about a dozen possible locations in Alameda County," Baldwin interpolated. "The areas are not small, but restrict the location somewhat. Also, if you recall, that most annoying incendiary that landed in our front room the night you arrived was packaged in a bottle of Oak Barrel Muscatel — this is packaged only by a small winery in Oakland, and is sold at comparatively few stores. There are only three spots in Oakland where this particular type of mud could have been picked up.

"Now, Miss Keldur, tell us again your news. Mr. Solo, Miss Keldur has pulled a bit of forgotten conversation from the depths of her memory, and the world may well be thankful for it. Tell him, my dear."

Garnet stammered a little bit, and Napoleon remembered all she had been told about Thrush before. But she caught her breath and repeated what she had obviously told several times before this evening.

"I remember...I remember Kim complaining about the noise I made while I was vacuuming. He said it was almost as noisy as the other place — that was where he was working half the time, up here I guess — with the airplanes buzzing overhead all day and half the night." She looked around at Baldwin and Waverly, and then at Robin, who was watching her intently. "And when I remembered this, I thought it was something you should know, and I didn't want to phone or wire, so I came myself."

"And a fortunate thing it was," said Baldwin, "because..." He paused as Irene set a platter of spaghetti before him. "Gentlemen, no more business. My wife's spaghetti sauce takes full attention and appreciation. The fate of the world must wait until after dinner. In the meantime, eat well. We may have a large night ahead of us." And so saying, he addressed himself wholeheartedly to his platter.

With a smile and a reassuring wink to Garnet, Napoleon did the same. And only idle conversation was permitted for the next half hour.

* * *

Later, in the library, Baldwin brought out an Ordinance map of the Oakland area, and spread it out on the oak table. Certain areas had been carefully cross-hatched.

"Here is our area," said their host. "The Oakland Airport is so located that few of the flights go low over occupied land areas. But it is indeed open, as Miss Keldur's memory indicates, all day and half the night. There are no scheduled flights in or out between 12:30 and 6:30 a.m. You will notice this entire artificial semi-island on which the airport is located is cross-hatched. This indicates that it is made of the same sort of soil which Mr. Kuryakin so cleverly retrieved."

His long forefinger glided along Earhart Road, indicating a row of large buildings, all numbered. "There are in this area quite a number of airplane hangars of various sizes. The evidence indicates that we may have been blinding ourselves by looking for a warehouse. An aircraft hangar could draw a great deal of power, could be locked securely, could be convenient for unobserved comings and goings, and right here" — he touched a small point of land — "is a large public boat ramp, where supplies of material too large even to be easily trucked through the streets could be brought ashore under cover of darkness. And finally, it has more space for the construction of something gigantic and devilish than any but the largest warehouse."

"I might also add," said Waverly, "that there were recently several unexplained crashes here. It seems that about three or four months ago there was a series of incidents in which in aircraft's engine stopped suddenly while actually on the glide path. There were three such incidents in the space of a week, and one since, according to our reports. They no longer appear coincidental."

Baldwin said, "I am expecting momentarily a call from our intelligence branch, who were instructed to trace the ownership on every one of those hangers. Some are deserted, some are in full-time commercial use. One of them has a faulty cover story, and when we find it, we will have found our DAGGER."

Exactly on cue, the telephone rang. Baldwin limped over to the stand, and picked up the receiver. "Baldwin. Yes...Yes...Very good. Thank you." He replaced the receiver and returned to the table. He leaned his cane gently against it with an almost exaggerated carefulness, and looked around the group clustered about the map.

"That was, of course, the expected report. There are two possible sites which could not be absolutely guaranteed. One is owned by the Flaherty Air Taxi Service, on which no information could be found. The other is in the name of Miss Gloria Fisher, of Ascot Drive, Oakland. Yes, Mr. Solo?"

"Miss Fisher was one of the larger contributors to Kim Keldur's work. I was visiting her just yesterday, trying to get some information on DAGGER. She — ah — knew nothing."

"Circumstantial though this evidence may be, I think we have now come to the end of the search." Baldwin's long forefinger touched lightly on the map, and this time it did not move but rested steadily on one building. "Gentlemen," he said, "this is the place."

* * *

Half an hour later the attack party set out for Oakland. They had discussed the idea of a full-scale raid, but Waverly had pointed out that any advance warning could let Keldur escape, and the area was probably guarded. Surprise was the most important factor in this operation.

"All indications are that the full-scale Energy Damper is almost ready to go into operation. If it can be captured intact, an examination of its circuitry could be of inestimable value. If Keldur is allowed to escape, he can build another one with the support he will get when his supposedly peace-guaranteeing project is actually raided and destroyed." He paused, then added thoughtfully, "I suppose in a way it *is* something that would guarantee a permanent peace to the entire world. But there are a few things worse than war..."

After some discussion Robin and Irene were to be left behind. More than one car would double the chance of detection as they approached, and the Rolls would be full. Waverly was opposed to Garnet's coming, but she remained absolutely adamant. "Kim is my brother, Mr. Waverly. If I could just talk to him for a few minutes, I'm sure you would be saved a lot of danger. He's sick. He needs help." Waverly made irritated noises, but finally gave in and allowed her to be the fifth in the party.

At 9:00 P.M. they started for Oakland.

At nine forty-five the Rolls stopped without a sound some hundred feet away from the hangar they had picked, and they made their way on foot across grass and soft bare earth.

Napoleon had retrieved his own U.N.C.L.E. Special from the warehouse that afternoon, and had taken some time to check it over and clean it, so that it was in perfect functional order again. He felt much better with it tucked back in his hand.

Baldwin was in the lead, picking his way through the darkness with his cane in one hand and a Thrush infra-red spotlight in the other. He and Waverly were equipped with goggles, and as they approached the building he gestured the rest of the group to stop.

He moved carefully up to the small door at the side, and checked it over carefully. He leaned his cane against the wall, and bent over the doorknob in a position Napoleon recognized. Again in some fifteen seconds he straightened up, and returned to them.

He gestured them to gather closely, then whispered, "Mr. Waverly, they shouldn't know you are here, so I would like you to be our hole card. Come in after either five minutes or a distress call, and be ready for anything. Garnet, you will wait with Mr. Waverly. If we can catch your brother off guard, you will have your chance to talk to him. Napoleon, Illya, you will go in first. Keldur will certainly recognize any of us, and I am somewhat limited in a fight. This is our order of battle. Don't fire unless fired upon, and have your gas-filters in. And try not to damage any more equipment than is necessary."

They all nodded, and Waverly checked over his pet Webley. Garnet noticed his use of non-standard equipment, and asked if it were a special kind of gun. Waverly said, "The best gun depends on the man behind it. I prefer the way this one handles. Besides, we've been through a great deal together, and we've always taken good care of each other."

Napoleon and Illya made one last check around, and then, side-by-side, started for the door, Baldwin stumping along behind them. They paused at the door, which stood ajar a crack, and listened.

There was a distant hum of power and an occasional clatter that told of machine tools in use. Napoleon gave Illya a brisk nod, and they pushed the door open.

It led into a small cubicle, an office of some kind, with a second door and window facing out into the hangar itself. And under a few glaring lights high overhead squatted a huge tangle of cables, panels and circuitry. It looked somewhat as he had expected, Napoleon thought — as if half the mad scientists from countless films had combined their efforts in one superhuman attempt to create some ultimate horror.

The Energy Damper stood almost thirty feet high and over fifty feet square. There were jury-rigged scaffolds around it, and electric cords draped like festoons over an idol. Rising from the top of the machine almost to the roof of the hangar was weirdly twisted coil, about ten feet in diameter. It appeared to be made of some heavy cable, each strand of which had been wrapped with a finer wire which shone under the lights. The panels around the base were a maze of meters, switches and tally lights.

Some of the panels were polished and gray, some of them rough and blue, or green. Some were unfinished aluminum sheeting with holes cut and dials stuck through. The whole machine gave an impression of a gigantic experimental rig put together by a theoretician or a technician who was only interested in the insides. And since most of the equipment was probably there only to be used once, it somehow seemed reasonable to put less effort into a neat appearance. *Still*, Napoleon thought, *it's such a sloppy-looking thing to end the world with.*

* * *

A weapon to destroy ten thousand years of human development — or half a billion years of evolution — should be sleek and polished, bright and deadly. A cobalt bomb the size of a submarine, fat, streamlined and gleaming. A clear glass vial of mutated virus, almost indistinguishable from distilled water. A glittering crystal of ice-nine. It should look...efficient.

This faintly ridiculous conglomeration of junk looked no more deadly than another collection of miscellaneous parts Napoleon had seen pictures of — a stack of graphite blocks and U-235 slugs which had been constructed on a handball court in Chicago, and had been the world's first atomic power pile.

There were only a few people in sight — most of them in makeshift coveralls of one type or another. There were no guards; even the workers were unarmed. It looked like a movie set, or a graduate research project built with limited funds.

Baldwin murmured, "We have them entirely by surprise. The day is ours. Pardon me...." And he opened the door into the shop.

He stepped forward two paces, allowing Napoleon and Illya to stand flank to him, guns drawn. Then he rapped his cane on the floor twice. The thumps echoed through the chamber, and heads turned.

"Attention, please," he announced. "Put down your tools and raise your hands. You are all under arrest, and anything you say may be taken down and used as evidence. Everyone come off the scaffolding and out of the machine; line up here on the floor before me."

A few of them started to move, and then a distorted metallic voice rang from over their heads.

"Stay where you are. Before you try anything, Baldwin, look up and look around."

There weren't many men on the roof of the little office room, no more than half a dozen. But each of them had a heavy caliber rifle pointed downward toward the three invaders.

As they looked up the office doors slammed behind them, cutting off their only retreat. The man with the bull-horn aimed his voice at the machine. "Don — Leo. Come over here. Some people you should say goodbye to."

Two men, the only ones wearing white coats, appeared and approached. One was husky and blond, the other slight and slender, with a vague face. There was a rustle and a thump, and the tall, slender young man with the cold glittering eyes was standing beside them, loud-hailer by his side.

"Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin. You will remember me. So will you, Mr. Baldwin. Now would you please put your guns away? Any sudden moves would result in your untimely death in a much less pleasant manner than you have earned."

Napoleon and Illya replaced their automatics, and Kim Keldur continued, "Too bad you came tonight. Tomorrow the Energy Damper will be ready for its final tests, and you should be allowed to see it. But we can't keep you very long. You are very hard to capture or kill, so we will take advantage of our position while we have you.

"Get them back to the corner," he said to the men on the roof. Three of them shouldered their weapons and climbed down, then took up the guard

again while the other three joined them. Napoleon and Illya were hustled off, and one guard tried to grab Baldwin's cane.

"I warn you, young man," said the Thrush chief sharply, "I cannot walk without my stick. If you take it, you will have to carry me, and I am not an easy load."

The DAGGER looked at Keldur, who nodded. "Let him keep it, but watch him. The old devil is tricky."

As he and the other two stood with guns bristling around them, Napoleon thought, *Mr. Waverly was scheduled to come to the rescue in five minutes. I hope he remembered to wind his watch this morning.*

Chapter 15: "Mr Solo, We Are DAGGER!"

They were taken to the next corner of the hangar, where there were a few folding chairs and a table, and directed to sit down with their hands under them. Keldur leaned against the table.

You have been looking for us for some time. I am Kim Keldur. This is Don Chernik" — he indicated the husky blond — "and this is Leo Holt. The device you see before you is ours."

"And who do you think you are?" Napoleon asked.

Keldur smiled a thin, hard smile. "Mr. Solo, we are DAGGER. We will open the throat of the world with our blade, and bring antiseptic peace to this crawling cesspool of a planet. Our goal is the most noble in the history of the foul human race, and we are about to achieve it. My discoveries, the designs and constructions of my friends here — fate brought us together like parts of a supercritical mass which will irradiate and cleanse the globe.

"Rather an ambitious statement, my boy," said Baldwin. "The world is a very large place, and quite full of life."

"Words mean nothing," Keldur said. "The only proof is experimental proof. Two days from now, if anything lives on this planet, it will prove my theories wrong. But I have more evidence behind my prediction." He rose, and stalked over to a cabinet. "Would you like a demonstration? You shall have one."

Napoleon recognized the device he brought out, and his heart started to pound. It was the first working model — the one Illya had smashed just before it could claim its first victim. And now it would claim three. Napoleon Solo was afraid of very few things in the world — but this was one of them. He knew its effects too well. The back of his neck tightened until his scalp ached.

Keldur carried it lovingly back to the table. "Unfortunately, we cannot maintain you until the final test tomorrow. A less humane man than I would simply shoot you and throw your bodies into the Bay. But then you would suffer needlessly. This will be most gentle."

He stroked the coil gently with a fingertip. "This coil is directional. The one up there" — he gestured — "is non-directional. That and the size

are the only essential differences between the two. All those controls are simply to check separate parts of the circuitry. One master switch will send a sufficient surge of power to all parts of it at once when the time comes, and the field will begin to spread out. Only a few connections remain to be made in the final stages. I really wish you could be with us to watch. Your world ending — and mine beginning. But you are too dangerous. You would try to interfere, and too much must be done. Now you will have to be content with this small-scale version — which will be quite large enough for you. Goodbye, gentlemen." And he twisted the knob on the side.

Napoleon wanted to scream, but his throat wouldn't open. And then his legs and arms were growing numb, and time was slowing down. The room grew darker and began to fade....

And then the light was there again, and the echoes of thunder were filling the hangar. He turned his head, and saw Waverly standing in the entrance from the office, his Webley smoking in his right hand. "The first man who moves will die on the spot," the familiar firm voice barked.

Keldur leaped from the table and was gone as the Webley thundered again and the slug tore a hole in the cabinet behind which he had vanished. Napoleon fumbled for his automatic, but his fingers still wouldn't obey. The guards were dropping to the floor, their automatic rifles coming to bear on the U.N.C.L.E. commander. The Webley roared again, and one guard fell aside, dead before he hit the ground. Then there was a sound like a fire-extinguisher, and a billow of white smoke covered the remaining five guards.

It squirted from the end of Baldwin's cane as a liquid, and was directed like a stream from a hose upon the prone figures, but it turned to a heavy gas in mid-air, a safe distance away from the user. Two rifles fired wildly, and the guards thrashed a moment upon the floor, then were still. The gas dissipated rapidly as Baldwin said, "Thornite. Now you see why I still keep it in stock. Much more efficient than the Webley."

"At least at short-range," said Napoleon. He finally had his automatic out, and was looking anxiously about for anyone of the opposition forces. The workers had all disappeared from around the machine, and they seemed to be alone as Waverly hurried toward them.

"I get the impression I arrived at just the right time," he said.

"You could have come in a minute earlier, and I wouldn't have minded at all," said Napoleon. "You see what I meant, Illya? We've got to destroy that thing."

"Afraid not, Napoleon," said Waverly. "Our technical crews want to take it apart carefully."

Illya, looking around the huge hangar, suddenly flipped his gun up and snapped off a shot at a shadowy figure near the far end.

"Let's get out of here," he suggested. "We can come back in the morning with an army to dismantle the machine."

"And let Keldur get away to build another one? I'm afraid I missed him as he ducked behind the cabinet," said Waverly, "and you know my feelings about leaving a job unfinished. We don't leave until Kim Keldur has been fastened down securely, one way or another. Illya, step outside, and bring Garnet in."

When this was accomplished, Garnet was given the bull-horn. "Kim?" she said, her hesitant voice booming back from the corrugated walls of the hangar. "Kim? It's me. Please come out and give yourself up. You can't get away now. They don't want to hurt you. I'll take care of you — I promise...." Her voice caught, and a grotesquely amplified sob echoed around before she released the switch.

She managed to bring herself under control, and her voice was almost steady when she spoke again. "Kim — you can hear me. Please answer me, Kim. They can't give you much longer. Come out and give..." Her amplified voice faded and suddenly it was just her ordinary voice

She looked at the horn. "That's funny," she said. "It just..." She looked up, with a vaguely puzzled expression. "I...I feel funny...."

Napoleon looked at his watch. It had stopped.

He felt a little vague himself, but he wasn't blacking out. He saw a bank of tally lights on a panel wink amber, and then fade and go out. The Energy Damper had been switched on, uncompleted though it was, and its field filled at least the area they were in. But the Theta was not full — they were still alive.

He snapped to Illya, "He must be on the other side. Let's get him."

They took off on slightly wobbly legs and went opposite directions around the big machine. A flying body dropped on Napoleon as he came around the corner, and he went down.

The man must have been waiting on the catwalk, Napoleon realized as he was falling and twisting to one side. He landed on his shoulder, rolled up quickly, and scrambled to his feet. He flipped out his gun and snapped, "Hold it right there!" The DAGGER started to his feet, and Napoleon pulled the trigger, aiming over the man's shoulder. Nothing happened. Instinctively he worked the ejection slide, and pulled the trigger again. The firing pin clicked on another dead cartridge. He worked the slide and the trigger the third time as the man's fist came at him.

He swayed slightly to one side and let it glance harmlessly off his shoulder, and then he hit him over the head with the otherwise useless gun. The DAGGER went down and stayed down.

Napoleon looked around for Illya. The wiry Russian was engaged in hand-to-hand combat with two coveralled technicians, one of whom was attempting to wield a wrench. Napoleon sent his automatic on ahead, and caught the man's wrist with it. The wrench fell, and a moment later the man joined it on the floor as Napoleon hit him with a full body-block.

In a few seconds Illya had taken care of the other one, and stood there breathing heavily. "Let's turn the thing off! It must have been started from somewhere over here."

"With all these switches? It would take an hour just to work each of them. And we don't dare monkey with the controls — it might still go wide open. Do you know what to do with it?"

Illya looked up at the machine. "All right, we leave it alone. But where are the others?"

The sounds of a scuffle were plainly heard now from the area near the door. They sprinted around the end of the machine again and saw Waverly going down under a swarm of technicians. Baldwin was still on his feet, backed up to the wall, laying about him with his cane like a demon. Garnet had picked up a chair, and broke it over one of the backs in the mob around Waverly.

And then Napoleon and Illya were in the thick of the fight. Napoleon couldn't tell exactly who he was fighting, because there were so many of them, but he was able to keep clear of Baldwin, who was shouting something fierce and guttural and swinging his cane like a battle-axe. Garnet had run out of chairs and was poking at the tangle with a table leg. Illya and Waverly swam across his line of sight for a moment every now and then, but most of his attention was taken up with hitting and being hit by an apparently inexhaustible supply of total strangers, most of whom wore dirty overalls.

The field of the Energy Damper prevented use of firearms or any other specialized weapon which used energy transformation to power it. Apparently the field was not large after all — with a small corner of his mind Napoleon realized the overhead lights were still on. But they were near the coil.... Of course, he remembered as he picked up another individual and threw him at two more, Keldur said the last stage wasn't connected yet. A good thing, too. This was enough work in the light. The only things unaffected were straight transfers of energy — a fist would still move a jaw a certain distance when impacting properly.

And there were one or two knives glinting under the harsh lights — they worked just as well, too. Napoleon and Illya were well-trained in the roughest schools of hand-to-hand fighting, but the weight of numbers just about evened the odds.

Even in the biggest part of the fight, a corner of Napoleon's mind continued to talk idly to itself. He remembered the cabinet Keldur had ducked behind just a minute or so before the machine had gone on, and he considered how far it was from the far side of the Energy Damper, where he must have turned it on, because they hadn't seen him on this side. But suppose the simple on-off control was not built on to the machine at all? He might be able to find it. He flattened one more opponent, and looked around. Illya and Waverly were still doing all right, and Baldwin had moved away from the wall toward the center of things, balancing on his good leg and shouting *"A'mhorfhaich!"* every time he connected.

Napoleon broke away and ran for the cabinet. He could recognize it by the gouge Waverly's slug had left in the side. It was about two feet from the wall, and a bit snug for anyone less skeletal than Keldur, but Napoleon

made it. He felt his way along, and then ahead he saw a small box stuck on the back of an equipment rack. It had a red insignia on it — the picture of a dagger. He lifted the lid.

Inside there was a closed knife switch. Mentally crossing his fingers, he jerked it open.

Suddenly there was a fusillade of explosions, and shouts of surprise from the other side of the rack. He forced himself past another rack to a corner, and found a little ladder leading up to the roof of the office area. He ran up it like a cat and leaped lightly from the roof to land beside Illya.

"Hi. I found the *off* switch."

"Good. Here's Keldur," Illya said, holding up a limp figure. "He wouldn't come quietly. Chernik had a knife — he got it returned to him, and did not survive it. Holt may live; I think he has a concussion. I think we taught them a lesson."

"So I see. What were those things that sounded like shots?"

"I was about to ask you. Did you..."

Waverly's voice cut across their conversation. "Clear the building and drag our prisoners out with you. Whatever went off has started a fire."

Napoleon snapped his fingers. Of course. The rounds he had fired after the machine had been switched on had finally detonated when the field had collapsed.

For the next few minutes he was busy dragging prisoners out through the one available door. The flames were climbing, licking around the framework of the flimsy building and catching the scaffolding around the machine.

Once outside, Waverly used his transceiver to make a rush call for the local fire department, but they might not arrive in time to save the machine. The flames were visible through the door, and were spreading.

Nobody was watching the prisoners, and before they were aware of it Kim Keldur had recovered from the blow that had felled him. Suddenly he sprang from behind them and dashed for the door.

Garnet screamed, and Waverly snapped, "Stop him!" But it was too late. He was through the door, into the flames. There was a long moment of

silence. Illya started to say something.

And then the flames dwindled and died.

"He's got it started again!"

"I know where the switch is," said Napoleon grimly. "I'll have to go in there and stop it." And he headed for the door. About ten feet away his feet seemed suddenly gripped by mud, and his breathing grew strained. The light from his flash vanished, and his head was stuffed with cotton. He fell forward, hearing a faint distant voice calling his name.

* * *

"Napoleon!" Illya jumped forward as he saw Solo fall. "He's not only got it going, he's got the Theta up. Give me a rope, quick!"

Garnet dashed to the car and found one in the tool kit. Illya took it and swiftly fashioned a rough loop in one end. Swinging this, he advanced until he began to feel the effect of the fringes of the field. Then he whirled the loop a few times around his head, and threw it. And missed.

Feeling dizzier, he hauled it in and moved back a step. He threw the rope again, and almost caught Napoleon's leg with it. As he leaned forward he almost fell over. The field was expanding! Each time he missed he would have to move back farther, or be caught in the field himself. Fixing every bit of concentration in his mind on the bent leg of his partner, he swung and tossed the rope again — and it caught. He pulled gently to see if it would hold. It did.

Then he put his weight on it, and began to drag Napoleon out of the field. It was expanding faster now; he was over twenty feet from the door and feeling slightly affected by it when he got Napoleon to him.

Napoleon had to be almost carried back to the car, still semiconscious from the effects of the Energy Damper. They stood by the car, wondering if the field would stop, and how soon, and where.

There was nothing left they could do. Cut off the power? The machine itself did that. Once it had started, it was a law unto itself. There was no way to turn it off from the outside, and nothing could function inside that field. A long, jointed level with a system of mirrors and lenses could be

reached inside and around corners to the switch — but by the time such a device could be made it would be far too late to do any good.

And the field was still expanding.

Suddenly Baldwin turned to face them, and there was a gun in his hand. "All right," he said. "There's nothing more to be done here. Get into the car and drive as I tell you. You aren't going to like this, but there is no time now for half-measures. With luck and quick work we may have a chance. Illya, drive."

Working with one hand and holding his gun with the other, Baldwin turned on the radio. He fumbled out the microphone and called. A moment later there was an acknowledgment. Illya started the car as Baldwin began to speak into the microphone. He recited a short list of letters and numbers, and concluded tersely with, "Execute — Priority Absolute Prime."

He waited for another acknowledgment, then replaced the mike. He gestured with his gun. "Let us depart. Illya, I want to be half a mile away from here within two minutes."

They were. The Rolls paused near the edge of a golf course at Baldwin's direction, and they looked back. A moment later he pointed to the sky. "There," he said, as a pair of bright lights appeared. "Watch that, gentlemen, and pray. It is our last hope."

It was a large twin-engine cargo plane, landing lights bright, coming in low as though making a landing approach. But it swerved uncertainly as it came down. And it was coming down too steeply for the runway. It was coming down short....

It hit the wall of the hanger just above the ground. There was a great grinding crash which reached them clearly across half a mile of field, and a great flash of light. Two seconds later a giant fist of the shockwave slammed them on the chests as they watched the hanger walls bulge outward horribly for a fraction of a second, and then a shattering roar came as the whole building vanished in a billowing cloud of smoke and flame.

No one moved or spoke for a full minute.

Then Baldwin broke the silence.

"Kinetic energy, directly applied, was the only thing that could affect the machine inside the field. I was not intending to use this, but I knew it could become necessary. I simply arranged for the largest convenient mass with the greatest amount of kinetic energy available — in this case a robot-controlled plane, directed by my wife through a television camera in the nose — to be dropped on the machine. The success of this unfortunately final but ultimately necessary action is now terribly obvious. Mr. Waverly, my apologies for destroying your prize, but I think you see my reasoning."

They drove back toward the site, and arrived almost simultaneously with the fire engines. Many excited questions were asked, but none were directed toward them. The efforts of the firemen were almost totally oriented toward the protection of nearby buildings — those that had been set afire by the blast. The hanger was already more than a total loss. Not more than a few smoldering sticks and a fused mass of metal would remain.

They got out of the car to look at the spot, and said nothing. Napoleon stood with an arm around Garnet's shoulders. He felt them shaking slightly with her suppressed tears, and said gently, "Garnet, he must have died as soon as he threw the switch. The explosion destroyed only the machine."

She turned to face him, and the roaring flames lit her face with red and orange and shone in the drying tear-trails down her cheeks.

"Napoleon, my brother died almost two years ago. Now perhaps he has found his peace at last."

"I'm sure he has," Napoleon said, knowing that somehow that was an inadequate thing to say, and saying it anyway. "I'm sure he has."

Chapter 16: "*'The Object Of Power Is Power.'*"

There was nothing more to be done. The rounding up of the various members of DAGGER was purely routine, and would be handled by Jerry Davis' men at the San Francisco office of U.N.C.L.E.

The individuals who had contributed money to Keldur would probably never know what happened — eventually they would decide they had been conned, and would be a little more cautious the next time a thin young man with brilliant eyes came asking for contributions to save the world from itself.

Napoleon and Garnet, Illya and Waverly had spent the promised day seeing San Francisco with Baldwin, Irene and Robin, and now it was evening again, and time for them to go.

They had been driven back to the airport in the official Thrush Rolls Royce in plenty of time for Garnet to catch her flight to Los Angeles, and with an hour to spare before the U.N.C.L.E. flight to New York.

"Well," said Baldwin as they stood up from the table in the airport lounge, "our common goals had been achieved, and our alliance is ending."

"Yes, it is," said Waverly. "Tomorrow we will be enemies again. I am afraid if we meet again, it will be with bars between us. Still, I must admit it has been most interesting working with you."

"Thank you; may I say the same? You are a fine man, a good fighter, and a worthy opponent. And Mr. Solo, you showed admirable courage in your attempt to re-enter the hanger."

"Well, I left my automatic in there, and I didn't want to lose it again...."

Baldwin smiled. "Nevertheless, there is no courage where there is no fear. Someday we may be able to find you a place in our organization. Mr. Waverly, you have a staff worthy of you." He shook his head sadly. "It's tragic that you're on the wrong side."

Waverly, too, shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't see it that way. Our ultimate goals are too much opposed. We want the world to belong to its citizens — you want it to belong to yourselves. There is no middle ground, and we must fight to the death." He paused, frowning. "What do you plan to do with the world if you should take over? Other than restoring the cable

cars, tearing down the Embarcadero Freeway and resuming the ferry service, and a few other improvements I must admit I tend to agree with, that is. What exactly will be the purpose of your power?"

By this time they were out on the main concourse, walking in a tight group. Baldwin paused in his stride, and reached into his inner coat pocket. "Here," he said. "This might explain a part of it." He withdrew a paperbound book and extended it, face down. "Page 217. The passage is marked."

As Waverly took the book, the loudspeaker called, *"Flight 93 for New York is boarding at Gate 12."* And another voice announced, *"Mr. Ward Baldwin, take a courtesy phone. There is a call for you."*

* * *

Baldwin shook hands all around quickly, and hurried away. Irene said, "It's really been great fun having you here. I wish we could invite you back sometime. Perhaps you will be our guests in a few more years."

Robin said nothing, but let her eyes shine up at Napoleon and Illya as she pressed their hands in turn. When she came to Waverly, though, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him. Then she and Irene were gone in the crowd.

Waverly stood looking after them for a full minute, a bemused expression on his face, the book Baldwin had given him resting in his hand, a finger inserted to mark the page. Eventually he collected himself and cleared his throat impressively. "Well! Gentlemen, we have a plane to catch."

He slipped open the book and glanced at the marked passage on page 217, and did not walk toward the ramp. Napoleon and Illya each looked over a shoulder, and read:

"We seek power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power, pure power.... No one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means; it is an end. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?"

* * *

Napoleon read it through once, and again. He looked at Illya, and said, "That is a statement of Thrush policy." It was not a question.

"Yes," said Illya. "It is."

"What's the book?"

Illya looked at him with slightly raised eyebrows, and then looked down significantly. Napoleon followed his gaze.

Mr. Waverly had closed the book, and was looking at the cover. The title was big and black beneath the author's name *1984*.

He turned idly to the front pages, and stopped at the flyleaf. It was inscribed in dark green ink, in strong, jagged handwriting. Alexander Waverly, from Ward Baldwin. For reasons too complex to transcribe. November 1965."

After a few seconds of contemplation and a snort which might have become a chuckle had it been allowed all the way out, Waverly closed the book. As an afterthought he rifled the pages carefully and felt the spine. Then, satisfied it was not a fiendish device of some kind, he tucked it carefully in his inside pocket.

"Now," he said again, "We have a plane to catch."

They started up the corridor toward the loading ramp that had been called. It was approaching flight time, but there seemed to be no other passengers around. Then Napoleon stopped. There were four men coming towards them, up the hall. With a slight shock he recognized one of them — the Thrush who had led the party that had rescued them in Oakland three days before. He didn't look as friendly now.

Napoleon glanced over his shoulder and saw four more coming toward them from behind. He sighed deeply.

"Excuse me, sir," he said to Waverly, who seemed lost in thought. "Exactly when was the alliance with Thrush supposed to end?"

"End? Supposedly, when we arrive safely in New York the hostages will be released. But the way Baldwin shook hands..." He saw the men

approaching, and his eyebrows arched. "They don't look like a farewell party, do they?"

"I'm afraid not," said Napoleon.

Illya had his gun out, and was walking with it concealed under his overcoat, which was draped across his arm. Waverly said quietly, "An incident at this point would be most unsatisfactory. Is there an exit?"

Napoleon nodded. "Over there. It says EMERGENCY ONLY."

"I think this qualifies," said Illya. "Napoleon, you'll pass closest. When we are even with the door, hit it hard and go through quickly. We'll be right behind you."

Without breaking their pace, they continued down the corridor until they were even with the gray door, and then Napoleon kicked suddenly at the panic bar and jumped through.

And then he was falling, bashing himself painfully in several spots on angled things, losing his gun entirely, and scraping some skin off his palms as he came to rest in a tangled heap on the floor, some ten feet below where he had begun. Above him he saw Waverly standing at the top of the stairs looking down at him with moderate disapproval, and Illya latching the door securely behind them. He groaned and shifted himself. At least nothing was broken. He sat up slowly.

Illya came down the steps behind Waverly and looked at him doubtfully. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Napoleon glowered at him as he got to his feet. "Now here's another nice mess you've gotten me into. Where's my gun?"

"Over there. Did you notice the stairs?"

"Not at first. Let's say I became aware of them one at a time. Did you see any reaction from the enemy to our disappearing act?"

"Some. You made quite a racket when you hit the stairs, and I think some of them were laughing."

Napoleon picked up his Special and checked it over carefully. And he had been doing so well, too. He thought his bad luck had ran out. Apparently there was still a little bit left in the bucket. He looked around the

little cubicle and saw another door, and a couple of small windows which showed the surface of the taxiway outside.

He stepped aside and nodded to Illya. "This time, *you* get the door." Illya turned the knob with his left hand, automatic ready in his right, and stuck his head out. He looked around, then pulled it in again and nodded. "All clear. Shall we try for that plane from the ground, or do they take people in only through the gates?"

"We'll see," said Waverly. "Come on, they won't wait forever."

Illya and Napoleon preceded him out onto the apron, guns drawn. The only sounds were engines warming up and the occasional whine of an electric baggage cart. One came humming across the field toward them, a train of little loaded trucks trailing behind it. It swerved to pass them at a distance of about twenty feet.

Illya suddenly shouted something, and leaped for cover behind a large wheeled stairway. Waverly moved with remarkable agility for a man of his years as two figures stood up from the other side of the high-piled baggage on the trucks and two sub-machine guns began blasting a hail of lead at them. Napoleon fell flat, too far from cover to make the leap. His U.N.C.L.E. Special was out and spitting flame, and one of the attackers dropped his weapon and fell from the truck. The other one fell victim to Illya's accuracy, but by the time they reached the spot the baggage cart had gone around a corner and disappeared.

Then lead smacked the blacktop beside them. The lights of the building dazzled them, and Illya and Waverly ducked for cover again. Napoleon dashed in a frantic zig-zag toward the source of the shot. Slugs spattered all around him as he sprinted for the cover of the building wall. Then there were two shots from behind him — Illya, with the telescopic sight on his U.N.C.L.E. Special cutting out the glare from the floodlights. No more shots came from above.

Under the temporary protection of the wall, Napoleon drew his little transceiver and pulled up the antenna. "Mayday — mayday — mayday. Agents Solo and Kuryakin and Director Waverly at San Francisco International Airport. Acknowledge, please."

A pleasantly cool female voice said, "You're on the distress line now. Go ahead."

"We're under heavy attack by Thrush. Call New York and tell them to hold those hostages, and get some reinforcements out here at once. Solo out."

"They're on their way," she said.

Only as he was replacing the transceiver did Napoleon stop to wonder if he'd really gotten through to the U.N.C.L.E. office, or whether Thrush had intercepted the call. He put the thought out of his mind. Even if it had been intercepted, U.N.C.L.E. would have received the transmission. And if they hadn't, the game was up. That was all there was to it.

Napoleon rejoined Illya and Waverly. "I called home," he said. "They'll be sending someone for us."

"All we have to do is wait for them," said Waverly. Napoleon couldn't tell whether there was a slight hint of sarcasm in his voice or not.

Illya was scanning the area with the telescope on his automatic. He stopped and spoke without taking it away from his eyes. "There are about half a dozen of them behind that tractor."

"Keep them pinned down," said Waverly, "but conserve your ammunition. Napoleon, keep looking in other directions. They may have intended to be seen to distract us from the real attack."

Illya snapped a shot which pinged off the foot of the tractor and howled away into the darkness. "Oh well," he said, keeping his eye to the scope, "at least it's nice to know who our enemies are again." He sent another shot after the first.

"Tally-ho," said Napoleon conversationally, and let off four quick shots to the other side. "Here come our bandits at a dead run."

The Thrushes scattered before his fire, diving for cover in various directions. One of them found time to lob a small grenade which burst with a puff just upwind of them. A cloud of smoke rolled over them.

"Squeeze your eyes tight shut," snapped Waverly. "I think I know what this is. They did this for several seconds until at last Waverly said, "Look out — here they come!"

They opened their eyes and saw the Thrushes bearing down on them from both sides. They hugged their cover and fired back. Napoleon felt a slug pluck at the shoulder of his coat, and his hat disappeared a moment later, but he was unhurt. His luck was back in operation.

Then there was a growing thunder in the sky, and a directionless wind whirled dust up all around them. Something chattered like a stick along a picket fence, and the attacking forces broke and scattered. Napoleon looked up.

There was the rescue force, in the traditional nick of time. The big helicopter with the skeleton-globe insignia roared above them, hovering unsteadily. Leaning out the door, a Thompson in his hands, was Jerry Davis himself, impeccable as ever, his hair only slightly disarranged by the airblast from the blades above him. He waved to them, and they waved back as the helicopter descended.

It touched the ground, and a door in the side opened to release a dozen or more field agents, who spread out across the blacktop, each with a small floodlight in one hand and a gun in the other, jacklighting Thrushes. Davis vaulted out of the door and, ducking his head under the blades with the ease of long practice, trotted over to them.

The motor roared, coughed, and died, and in the sudden silence they realized he was shouting. "I THOUGHT THE OLD..." He stopped, looked over his shoulder at the 'copter, and repeated in a normal tone, "I thought the old so-and-so would try a last minute doublecross. Didn't dare have the reinforcements any closer, though, or he might have got wind of them. He's got a nose like a fox, too."

Waverly harrumphed, and frowned. "I didn't expect him to break the alliance before the hostages were released. They were three key men in the Thrush American operation."

This time Davis looked worried. "But...we just received word from New York that they had been released, according to your order received an hour ago. Your office said you'd called from Kennedy International with the word you'd arrived safely and to let them all go. And they did.

"Then they thought to let me know the alliance was officially over, and to go back on a state of alert."

Waverly didn't say anything. There was nothing he could say, since he never swore.

He let a decent length of time pass for the number of epithets he had considered, and then said, "Baldwin must have had this entire operation set up to go into effect the moment he received word the hostages had been released. He very nearly succeeded."

He thought about it for a while, watching the lights moving here and there about the landing field, and hearing an occasional shot. "That's what I get for ignoring my own advice. I said when this whole business started that we had to work with them, but should watch them constantly. I was lulled off my guard by them." He shook his head sadly.

"And to think I saved that man's life fifty years ago...." He thought about this, too, and then picked up his overcoat. "On the other hand, he saved my life a few times in the last few days, as I saved his. I suppose the balance sheet is even now."

He started off down the field, Napoleon, Illya and Davis following him. Davis was talking about changing their reservations to the next plane; Napoleon and Illya were checking over their guns and reloading the expended clips. Alexander Waverly walked on ahead, and the thoughts that occupied his mind he communicated to no one.

Absently he searched his pockets until he found a pipe and tobacco, combined them carefully, and set fire to them. Still he remained apart from the conversations of the younger men — men who had seen so much less of life than he had, but who were already more used to the impermanence of treasured things. His thoughts rose with the cloud of tobacco smoke into the still, cold air, and caught the glare from the floodlights that still illuminated the landing field.

At length he became aware that the conversation had stopped, and he looked around. Napoleon and Illya were looking at him, and Davis was standing near the entrance to the concourse.

Waverly looked back at them, and cleared his throat. "Come, gentlemen," he said. "We still have a plane to catch."

And he went ahead of them through the opened door.

THE END

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